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Time, Flow Softly

Rain had fallen in the high mountains of New South Wales and Victoria, to swell the Murray, the Goulburn and the Campaspe, and to stir into welcome activity the wharf at Echuca where the three rivers met. It was more than enough to distract Delie Gordon from her job of tinting postcards at Hamilton's Photographic Studio, especially since the *Philadelphia* was due any day now with a cargo of wool from distant sheep stations along the Darling.

Delie's namesake, when she did arrive, had a new mate and part-owner: Brenton Edwards, a good-looking young man whose lazy insolence both affronted and attracted Delie.

BOOKS BY
NANCY CATO

POETRY

The Darkened Window
The Dancing Bough

NOVELS

All the Rivers Run
Time, Flow Softly

NANCY CATO
Time, Flow Softly
A NOVEL OF
THE RIVER MURRAY



HEINEMANN
LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO

William Heinemann Ltd
LONDON MELBOURNE TORONTO
CAPE TOWN AUCKLAND
THE HAGUE

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The river, the dark and secret river, full of strange time, is for ever flowing by us to the sea.

—THOMAS WOLFE: *Of Time and the River*

TO" MY MOTHER

PART ONE

The River and the Town

CHAPTER ONE

"The River's coming down!"

The word passed joyously from mouth to mouth, the *Riverine Herald* printed it, and the river itself proclaimed it, eddying past the wharf with increasing speed and volume. The clear summer water was beginning to be stained with the brown sediment of winter streams.

Rain had fallen away in the high mountains of New South Wales and Victoria; and now the Murray and the Goulburn and the Campaspe were bringing their separate streams to the Meeting-of-the-Waters, Buchuca.

This year there would be a good river before the snows started to melt in September. A 'good' river, to a town that depended on its steamer trade, was a full river; even if it overdid its goodness and spread into the streets, no one complained. Only a drought was to be feared.

Steamers for up-river which had been lying at the wharf all the summer, suddenly became active. Barges were tied to towing-poles, steam was raised, and with triumphant blasts on their whistles the *Adelaide* and the *Edwards*, the *Elizabeth* and the *Success*, each with three empty barges trailing behind, set off to begin the logging season. Some of the barges would be dropped off at the logging camps and then floated down with loads of red-gum; others would return with the steamers, loaded with flour from Albury, Howlong and Corowa.

The Government snagging boat *Melbourne* had left to free a jam of logs and debris at Stewart's Bridge on the Goulburn. Soon the Darling and Murrumbidgee traders, caught on a falling river last year, would begin to arrive back at their home port.

Seated in her small, back room cluttered with frames and mounts at Hamilton's Photographic Studio in the main street, Delie Gordon could see nothing of all this; of how the awakened

river sparkled in the sun, and the shadows moved under the great red-gum trees on its banks.

There was no rain in Echuca. The lovely sunny days of autumn passed over in calm progression; the gold and silver fleets of cumulus cloud sailed from west to east; but by the time she was free at six o'clock the sun would be setting.

Sounds of the life beyond filtered into her room: the life of a busy country town that was also an inland port. She could hear the clop-clop of horses' hooves in the street, the whine of a steam-saw down by the river, the rattle of cart-wheels and the shunting of trains. And, cutting across them all, the shrill, exciting note of a paddle-steamer blowing off at the Campaspe Junction.

She looked out at a glimpse of dusty back yard, and next to it the back yard of the Shamrock Hotel beyond a grey paling fence. Sighing, she turned back to tinting a picture of the Echuca wharf, lined with paddle-steamers unloading bales of wool. It was her first day at the studio and she wanted to do well, but her heart wasn't in the work. The long, lovely, disturbing note of the steamer's whistle had set her foot tapping restlessly.

Little Mr. Hamilton, thin and worried-looking in rimless glasses, came bustling in with a handful of tinted postcards she had done that morning.

He put them down on her table, took off his glasses, and tapped the cards with them.

"Very delicate work, very creditable, Miss Gordon." His mouth was thin, straight, and unsmiling; she had not yet seen it relax. "Yes, yes; but—ahem, unfortunately not what people want. They like plenty of Antwerp blue."

"You mean the sky? I didn't want to make it look unreal."

"Yes, yes; but it's not reality they want, only a pretty picture to send to their friends. The river in this one, now; looks a bit drab, doesn't it?"

"But the Murray isn't the least bit blue, Mr. Hamilton!"

"True, true; it's either green or brown, usually. But then people have fixed ideas. The sea is blue; the sea is water; therefore all water should be blue. Something like that their minds work."

Believe me, I know what will sell. Now try and see what you can do with these."

Delie's full bottom lip stuck out as she drew the bottle of Antwerp blue towards her. She had been delighted when her old friend Angus McPhee, editor of the *Riverine Herald*, had found this job for her, but already she knew she was not going to like it. All her artistic instincts were in revolt against the requirements of Public Taste.

Still, at least she'd be independent. She'd rather scrub floors than go back to being dependent on Aunt Hester, to being the 'orphan child', the 'helpless nuisance'. "I'll never go back to the farm, never," she said aloud.

It was no good Mrs. Mac wanting her to stay with them indefinitely as a kind of adopted daughter; she had insisted on paying board, because she was really not much help in the home and anyway she wanted to be free to put all her time into studying at the Echuca School of Arts. And now the McPhees were going to Bendigo, and she was really alone in the world. Alone in the world. It sounded pathetic, but also rather exciting, when she said it to herself like that.

And all her money was gone, though the bank had made some small reparations after the '93 crash. She had been living on her capital for two years now. And though Aunt Hester was only really about fifteen miles away up-river, she never saw her. She had gone out to the buggy and exchanged a few words with her the last time Uncles Charles was in town. They had been polite and stiff. 'I wouldn't go back,' she said to herself, with her old childhood habit of dramatising a situation, 'if she asked me on her bended knees.'

No, Echuca was her home. This was the place where she had gone to her first ball, and to picnics and parties with Adam. Though she still played tennis with Bessie Griggs, walked with her to church with a group of other young people, and joined her in boating excursions on the river, she had drifted away from her since Adam died.

She thought of Bessie's hurt tones when she had accused her of being sentimental: "You're so unfeeling these days, Delie! I'm

sure I cried more over Adam than you did; and you never go to the cemetery. Your own cousin! And such a handsome boy . . .”

Of course she couldn't explain to Bessie how she felt about the cemetery, how it filled her with an oppressive horror of the physical fact of death. She had not felt like this over the lonely boards that marked the far southern cliff-top where her family was buried; yet in the cemetery she seemed to feel the heavy granite slabs weighting her own chest so that she couldn't breathe. And the fresh mound of clay over a recent grave, and the sheer number of silent memorials all around—they oppressed her, they had nothing to do with her memory of Adam's warm and vital flesh. He lay in the large community cemetery on the outskirts of the town, where all denominations were buried in marked sections, keeping up among the dead the artificial divisions of the living. There was no graveyard at the church where Delie went each Sunday, from a kind of social habit rather than for any spiritual solace she received there.

The incumbent was the Reverend William Polson, who had been a curate of the same parish when she had first met him, out at the farm.

How he had gazed into her eyes then, over the piano (how old was she? Not more than fifteen, surely!), and he did it still, every Sunday morning, as he shook hands with the congregation in the porch. 'Like a mesmerised hen,' thought Delie irreverently. And surely he held her hand a trifle longer than was necessary, while enquiring after her aunt?

He had funny pale eyes, set so deeply beneath his light eyebrows as to give him a fanatical look at times. Oh, lother Mr. Polson! She dabbed irritably at the sky in a view of Echuca, making it a brilliant blue. She remembered his last visit to Mrs. McPhee's.

He had balanced his tea-cup delicately and crooked his little finger with killing elegance, while talking fashionable nothings and a little politics.

“Federation must come, of course; the year nineteen hundred will see us all one nation. The present system of the various States

cutting each other's throats is uneconomic and foolish; and border restrictions . . ."

Delie had looked at him, at his pale, thin, bony face and deep-set eyes, his prominent Adam's apple (Adam, and his strong brown throat! Adam, drowned and dead . . .). This was a spiritual leader of men, God's anointed, behind him all the dignity of the Church. She heard him saying in an affected voice, "Yes, I will have another of those delicious little cakes, I believe. Is your light hand responsible, Miss Gordon?"

"Oh no, my cakes always flop, or else they burn. Mrs. McPhee won't let me in the kitchen, will you, Mrs. Mac? How many things did I break in the first fortnight?"

"Now, Delie child, you're not as bad as all that. It takes all sorts to make a world; we can't all be domesticated types, can we, Mr. Polson? Didn't the Lord himself say that Mary had chosen 'the better part', while Martha was 'cumbered with much doing'?"

"True, Mrs. McPhee. Though I hardly feel——"

"And even if she can't bake cakes, Delie can paint like an angel." And she glanced proudly at two small water-colour sketches over the mantelpiece.

Delie looked at the floor while Mr. Polson paid them an extravagant tribute of praise.

She knew that they were competent, passable sketches such as any 'accomplished' young woman could turn out by the hundred. But she longed to paint great rich canvases that would hold all the remoteness, the subtle colour harmonies of this stange land where the trees were amber, olive, mauve, blue, but rarely green; where the skies were so pure that it seemed impossible they could ever be set down in the medium of heavy oil paint.

There was no limit to her ambition; but she writhed inwardly at these ill-informed praises of her present work, and the remarks: "Philadelphia is so artistic. How beautifully she tints postcards!"

When Mr. Polson had gone, Mrs. McPhee chided her gently: "Dear child, you shouldn't go out of your way to announce your shortcomings as a housekeeper. I do believe that young man is getting close to the point of making a declaration; the way he

looks at you! But you must remember that your face is your fortune, and act accordingly."

"Good heavens, M's. Mac! The way you and Aunt Hester talk you'd think there was no career open to a woman but marriage and having babies! I intend to make a career as an artist; I won't get married for ages, if ever; and as for him, I can't stand his languishing looks and his pale eyelashes. I'll say something really outrageous one day, and frighten him off for good."

Mrs. McPhee sighed, thinking that if Delie had no other fortune than her looks, she had still been well endowed. She wore her hair in the latest top-knot style that seemed to add height and grace to her figure. From its piled dark mass little ends escaped, to fall in tendrils over her neck and soften the outline of her white forehead. And besides her large blue eyes, she had a beauty that would last; it was built into the fine bone-structure of her face.

"Anyway," said Delie, who had been following her own train of thought, "you forget that I'm part-owner of a paddle-steamer, which might be making me a fortune up the Darling, for all we know."

"Part-owner! What part, may I ask? A twenty-fifth! No doubt you owed Captain Tom a debt of gratitude for saving your life, but I still think your fifty pounds could have been better invested. The sooner you ask him to pay you back, the better." Mrs. McPhee's sandy, frizzy grey hair stood out indignantly about her small face. "He should have known better, taking the money from a mere child, as you were then."

"I knew what I was doing, Mrs. Mac. And Uncle Charles gave his consent."

"Yes, but your guardian is a little—well, impractical, I think, dear."

"Anyway, Tom will offer me the money back as soon as he's paid off the interest, I know. Then I could keep on at the School of Arts for another year, instead of taking a job. Or perhaps I could do both."

Now, in the studio, looking at the row of postcards with impossibly green trees and bright blue water that she had finished

tinting, Delie thought of the same problem: how could she do both? She had meant to ask Mr. Hamilton at once for time off for art lessons, but so far his unsmiling face and severe demeanour had rather intimidated her.

He came hurrying in again—he was always in a hurry—and looked over her shoulder critically. Then he straightened up and rocked complacently on his heels, his mouth as straight and unsmiling as usual. Delie's heart beat uncomfortably.

"Now we're getting it," he said at last, with surprising enthusiasm considering his expression. "Now you've got the idea McPhee told me I'd be getting a very artistic young lady, a real gem. H'm, yes. Pity McPhee's leaving the town. A loss to the community."

"And to me personally; I'll miss them both terribly. They were my first friends in Echuca. They wanted me to go to Bendigo with them, but—I didn't want to leave the river."

"They both think very highly of you, I know that."

"Well, I hope I won't be a disappointment, Mr. Hamilton. I was going to ask you—"

"I'm sure you won't, my dear, sure you won't. Just remember plenty of Antwerp blue. These are excellent."

The bell in the outer studio rang sharply, and he bustled out. Delie took up her brushes with a sigh.

CHAPTER TWO

As a parting gift Mrs. McPhee had given Delie a new afternoon gown; or rather she had bought ten yards of pale blue bombazine, patterned with dainty pink rose-wreaths.

Together they had fashioned a gown with the new simple princess-skirt, with a slight train at the back and rows of frills about the wide hem. When she first put it on, and tied the blue sash about her waist, Delie felt a new poise, a sensation of being taller and more graceful. As she held the soft folds of the train in one hand to descend the stairs, she formed a deep feminine

plan. First she must ask Mr. Hamilton to take her portrait in the new dress.

It was her job each morning, before beginning work at tinting, to check the appointment book and dust the fittings—a carved wood and horsehair sofa, a potted palm, a backdrop with a painted staircase and marble balustrade, and a plush arm-chair.

Mr. Hamilton didn't like taking children, but she was a great help with them. She would sit a fractious infant on the fur rug, removing its boots so that it could feel the delightful tickle on its toes. Little girls with wide, frightened eyes and enormous sashes round their middles would stand on one black-stockinged leg and slip their hands into hers. Little boys, mutinous in best knickerbockers and lace collars, would cease to glare when they saw her smiling at them like a conspirator from behind their mothers' backs.

She had also learned the art of retouching, or making sitters appear more like their own flattering idea of themselves: erasing blemishes, darkening pale eyebrows, adding highlights to hair and teeth.

Mr. Hamilton was very pleased with her (though he said little) and wondered how he had ever managed with the rather dim-witted lad who had been his assistant before. But he didn't let her overwork. He was impressed with her fragile appearance, and on days when she looked tired and pale, would send her home early to rest.

But the pallor was natural, the tiredness was only boredom, and as soon as she was free she rushed to get her sketching materials and would be out drawing and painting until the last of the light.

She had the gown packed in a cardboard box in her room. She hurried away, when she had made sure the appointment book was empty for this morning, changed from her high-necked blouse and fitted skirt of blue serge, and slipped on the lovely soft folds. At once she felt a different person.⁴ Taking out brush and comb, she softened her hair a little with a few wisps of curls on the forehead. Then, with head up and skirts trailing gracefully, she swept into the studio.

Mr. Hamilton, who was pulling the sofa into a better light, stopped and blinked at her. The excitement of dressing-up had put a delicate colour in her clear cheeks and deepened her eyes to an intense blue, while between the dark hair and the level dark brows her forehead seemed white as marble.

"We-ell!" said Mr. Hamilton, staring. Delie smiled in triumph. "Here, this isn't wanted." He gave the sofa an impatient push. "This calls for the staircase and the Italian balustrade. I only wish," he said, bowing with what was almost a smile, "that I had a background worthy of the subject."

Delie stood calmly while Mr. Hamilton, the artist in him aroused, fussed over arranging her pose in front of the painted staircase. He fetched a cushion and spread her train over it on the floor. He went back to the camera, looked through, and emerged again, putting his head on one side.

"Er—your hands, Miss Gordon. I think they would be better behind your back. No, not jammed out of sight like that, just clasped lightly behind . . . that's better."

Her flush deepened a little. Her hands were much too big, she knew, and in a photograph they always looked worse—bony, long-fingered, too large for her slender wrists.

"A little more cheerful, please. No, I don't want teeth; just the hint of a smile. That's it—hold it!"

And her image as she was at that second of time, and would never be again, was transferred to the sensitive plate.

Before changing she fetched two pictures that had been packed at the bottom of the cardboard box—a canvas stretched on a frame, and a water-colour mounted on board. The first was a view of the town from the far bank, with its spires and water-tower rising among trees.

"Good, very good! I must get a photograph from that angle. Make a good postcard," said Mr. Hamilton. "H'm! These both your work? Very nice indeed." He picked up the sketch of a dinghy under a group of red-gums, reflected softly in green water.

This was her opportunity. She clasped the paintings to her and begged him to let her go two afternoons a week to the School

of Arts landscape class. Still life she was already doing at night; but painting was more important to her than anything. . . .

"Tch, tch! You'll soon be marrying and having a family, my dear, and you'll forget all this nonsense. You won't stay single long, if the young men of today are not stone blind. Er—how many lessons a week?"

"Only two, Mr. Hamilton. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, from three o'clock. I'll come back and work at night, if you like." She was very lovely and appealing, leaning forward in the soft blue dress with lips trembling with eagerness.

"No; I don't want you working back at night." He sounded quite gruff. "But you could start earlier in the morning, I suppose. All right. But don't go taking up portrait painting and putting me out of business."

The landscape class, with stools and easels and sketch-boxes, tramped off twice a week to some vantage point to indulge in *plein-air* painting, with all its delights and difficulties, from midges landing in wet paint to the worse hazards, of tiger-snakes and irate bulls.

Daniel Wise, the principal, was a landscapist at heart, and expanded in the open air. Striding about behind his students, in an old velvet jacket stained with colours like a paint-rag, he would tell stories of his early student days in Melbourne, and of artists' camps he had joined in the Dandenongs.

He had been a friend of Tom Roberts, and had stayed with him and "that clever young chap, Arthur Streeton", on the hill-top above Heidelberg, where they had a hut overlooking the Yarra basin and the long blue folds of the ranges.

"More than ten years ago . . . Ah, those were golden days," he would sigh, his greying beard ruffled wildly, his rather prominent eyes staring at nothing. "I'll never forget the hill of sunburnt grass, and the view of the long Divide to the north-east, all dreaming and remote . . . Great days, great days!"

And the students were careful not to look at him, for they knew that his eyes were moist with a facile emotion. Those others had dedicated themselves to art; he had married early, and had a

large family, and now spent his time teaching in a small town while his own artistic fire dwindled away.

In her usual impulsive way Delie was ready to worship him, because he was her master, because he was older, and because he wore for her an almost visible aura as a man who had talked to Roberts and Streeton. She was intrigued to learn that, like her, Roberts had come from England as a child and, like her, had worked for a photographer.

When Daniel Wise passed behind her easel the blood began to pound in her ears, she gripped the brush tightly and put on tiny, self-conscious brush-strokes until he had passed on. A brief word of praise made her glow with pleasure. He never said much before a picture was finished, except to indicate some fault in composition or drawing in the original sketch. Sometimes he took a brush and with a few deft touches of deep-toned colour transformed a pallid muddle into a picture.

He began to stop more often behind Delie, sometimes with an approving grunt, and to walk beside her when they were returning from an outdoor class. Gradually, as her awe grew less, they developed into friends; and the three other young women in the class showed that they resented this.

Delie didn't care; she was bored by their two subjects, clothes and boys, and preferred to talk to the men. She knew that they had labelled her as 'fast', but she was happy and absorbed in her work.

Her lonely and discouraged times came at night, when she sat in her cold bedroom sketching or reading, rather than join the stuffy types in the boarding-house parlour. If the night was mild, she opened her window and hung far out, when she could see past the side of the building the thick dark mass of trees that marked the river.

Why hadn't she done this earlier, come to Echuca to live while Adam was still here? Why had she failed him, why did he have to die? They still went round in her head, the old, unanswerable questions and regrets.

Her small collection of books, a print of Streeton's 'Golden

Summer' taken from a calendar, some geraniums on the window-sill, could not disguise the bare ugliness of the room. Beside the bed there was a rickety wash-stand, and a yellow-varnished duchess chest with a swinging mirror that would not stay in place unless a piece of cardboard was jammed in the side. Over this was draped a vivid striped silk scarf that she went without lunch for a week to buy. Bright canvases and painted boards, some unfinished, stood round the walls.

Colour was now a passion with her, colour more than form. She took less time and care than she should have done over her drawing, because she couldn't wait to squeeze out the lovely colours, so pure, so soft and delightful in texture, so exciting in their smell of oil.

This smell was more pleasing to her than the sweetest perfume; and Bessie Griggs declared that "she always smelt like a paint-shop". But canvas and paints were expensive. She begged cigar-box lids and other smooth pieces of wood from her friends to practise on.

Walking down High Street at lunch-time, she met her Uncle Charles in the buggy. He pulled in to the gutter, and she stood and patted Barney's glossy neck while she talked to him. Barney lifted his tail and dropped three spherical lumps of yellow dung on to the road.

At once she was thirteen years old again; she sat in the buggy staring at a heap of yellow dung about which the flies hovered, while her uncle told her that all her money was gone in the bank crash.

She shook off the memory and smiled up at Charles. "I'm going to paint a picture of the *Philadelphia* when she comes in. The *Pride of the Murray* and the *Invincible* came in yesterday from the Darling. She shouldn't be long now."

Delie was hatless. Her dark hair gleamed in the sun, glossy as the horse's coat, with rich amber lights in its sheen. He smiled down at her, but the melancholy droop of his eyes, the dispirited curve of his moustache, were accented by a sagging of his whole tall frame. Since Adam's death he had aged noticeably.

THE RIVER AND THE TOWN

"Don't forget to show it to me, then. I'm bringing your auntie in to see the doctor again next week. She's got painfully thin, you know. I thought it was just with moping over Adam, but that pain in her back and side is worse, and the doctor seems to think it's something serious."

"Poor Aunt Hester!" said Delie dutifully, but she thought to herself that her aunt would really be pleased to have a doctor's sanction for the self-pity she had indulged in for years. 'Now I'm being malicious,' she thought . . . But it was hard to forgive old injuries, to feel a Christian sympathy with someone like her aunt.

"I think she's better in other ways, though," said Charles, looking at her anxiously. "That last time when you came out to the buggy—I mean, she seemed quite glad to see you, none of that strangeness, that open hostility she showed when Adam died."

"No-o. But I felt the antagonism there still, under the surface. She hasn't forgiven me, for whatever she imagined I did; but she seemed quite normal, if that's what you mean."

"Yes, yes. Quite normal. Just what I think," said Charles, relieved.

CHAPTER THREE

At lunch-time Delie would go every day down to the wharf to see what new steamers had come in. She greeted old friends among the captains, and asked for news of the *Philadelphia*.

Steamers were arriving from the Darling every day now. The wharf was alive with shunting trucks and swinging cranes and the rattle of steam-winchies, as the square bales of wool bearing the stamp of far western stations were transferred for their train journey to Melbourne. Not only the barges, but the flat decks of the steamers were piled high with wool; as much as two million pounds' worth had crossed this wharf in a single year.

On a clear day in June, when the slanting sun shone with a golden light that gave an illusion of warmth in the midst of winter, Delie saw the *Clyde* and the *Rothbury* tying up, the little

Bantam beyond, and then another small side-wheeler, painted white. She couldn't see the name yet, but surely . . . Yes! It was the *Philadelphia*, her namesake, back from a thousand-mile trip into the far west of New South Wales.

She dodged under the iron rails that fenced off the working area of the wharf, and began to run, skipping over obstacles like thick mooring ropes and iron hooks. She went down the wooden stairs to the lower levels, and came out opposite the *Philadelphia's* gangplank.

"To-om! Hi, Tom!" she called, but there was no answer. The steamer appeared to be deserted.

Delie kilted up her serge skirt to her calves, crossed the gangplank and climbed the narrow steps over the nearside paddle-box, intending to knock on the door of the main cabin, where she thought the captain might be dozing. She was nearly at the top when she heard a low, appreciative whistle.

She turned on the narrow steps, and dropped her skirts instantly. A large young man, with crisp, red-gold curls, was leaning against the housing of the boiler with his arms folded. He wasn't actually grinning, but there was a certain light in his eyes.

"Oh!" said Delie, with a slight flush. "I was looking for Captain Tom. Is he aboard?"

"Not at the moment, no. Won't I do instead?"

There was a lazy insolence in his attitude as he leant there, with an old cap pushed to the back of his head; yet his voice was pleasant.

"I'm afraid not." She lifted her chin and stalked down the steps. Her dignified descent was spoilt by a stumble on the second-to-last one. The stranger leapt forward and caught her arm under the elbow in a grip so strong that the bone tingled. "Careful!" he said.

She disengaged her arm with some difficulty, and moved to the side. "Are you a new member of the crew?" she asked distantly.

"Yes. I'm the mate. Any objections?"

"Oh, then you're an employee of mine. I'm part-owner of this steamer."

"Then *you're* the original Philadelphia? She certainly is a trim craft."

This could be taken two ways. Delie was silent.

"But I'm not exactly an employee. You see, I'm a part-owner too."

"So Captain Tom has sold another share?"

"That's right. A half-share, to be exact."

"Oh." Delie felt herself growing pink again. Her miserable twenty-fifth share was known to this horrid man, and he was laughing at her. She hastened to escape. "Would you please give Captain Tom a message for me? He's probably gone to look for me at my old address. Would you tell him I can be found at Hamilton's Studio, in High Street? Thank you."

"Hamilton's, High Street. I won't forget, Miss Philadelphia." He raised the cap from his shining curls. But she hastened across the gangplank (raising her skirt only the minimum necessary for safety) and up the dark steps, with a sense of discomfort.

Did the conceited beast think she wanted him to know her address? For of course he was far too handsome, in a rather burly fashion, to be anything but conceited; and what cheek, the way he had looked at her! She hoped she wouldn't see him again.

"Capital was needed, y' see; she needed a over'aul. That's why I've took on a partner, like." Tom's big, awkward frame seemed to fill the little back room, as he balanced on a packing-case just inside the door. Delie wondered how he and the mate could both fit in the wheel-house. "This young chap was left money by 'is gran'pa, an' wanted to put it into a steamer, so I sold 'im an arf-share. We could pay you back your fifty, Miss 'Delphia, if you was wantin' it."

"Oh no, Tom! I love to think I own even a tiny little bit of her. I'd like to have a steamer of my own one day, and travel up and down the Murray, and the Murrumbidgee and the Darling. Did you get up as far as Bourke this time? Walgett! Oh, I wish, I wish I could come on the next trip!"

"Well, Miss, you know 'ow it is . . ." Tom scratched his greying beard. His tanned forehead was wrinkled with the effort of

expressing himself. "You bein' a young leddy, and all. If ony the mate was married, now, we could take 'is wife along too as—as a sort of a, what d'you call it?"

"Chaperone? Oh yes, we have to remember the proprieties! Not that I'd care, but Uncle Charles is still my guardian. Oh, *why* did I have to be born a girl? It's not fair."

'Now why did I say that just now, about not wanting my fifty pounds back,' she asked herself wonderingly. 'With that money I could have gone to Melbourne and the Gallery School for a year . . .' But she *was* proud of the steamer, if only that wretched mate——

"What's his name?" she asked abruptly.

"'Oose name?"

"That mate—your partner. I saw him down at the boat today."

"Brenton Edwards, if y'll believe it. But 'e's known as Teddy Edwards on the river. Shaping as a good river man, 'e is."

Tom was fumbling in his waistcoat pocket (he was more smartly dressed than she had ever seen him, with a complete dark suit, a bowler hat he had forgotten to remove, and even boots on his feet). He now brought out five one-pound notes, which he counted on to her table. Delie stared. She had not expected any such return. Now she could lay in a lovely stock of paints and canvas.

On Saturday afternoon she gave up a picnic trip to Stewart's Bridge, so as to paint a picture of the *Philadelphia*. Tom had promised to move her down below the wharf and tie up against a background of trees as soon as the stores for down-river—flour, tea, rabbit-traps, sugar, bullets, chaff-bags, machinery—had been loaded.

She took her painting things, and an old, loose dress she used as a painting-smock, and went down to the river's edge. The boat was tied beneath a steep bank, but there was a path going down and a level place where she could set up her easel.

She did so in some excitement and haste. The light was just right, but it would not last. The steamer was partly shaded by an

enormous gum-tree that dappled the superstructure with a pattern of leaves.

She had no stool; she preferred to stand, and step back frequently to see the effect as she proceeded. With eyes half-closed she planned the balance of lights and darks, fixed the boundaries of her picture, and sketched in the contours and the darkest tones. Then came the delightful moment of squeezing out the pure, new colours on to her palette.

Time passed unnoticed as she felt the picture begin to 'come'. Though the shadows had moved, and the light was becoming yellower with the declining sun, she had its final form fixed in her mind's eye.

With a new power and certainty she had not felt before, she worked surely and swiftly, every brush-stroke seeming to fall unerringly into place.

She added a highlight to the sparkling water beyond the shadow of the boat, and stepped quickly back to see the effect. She bumped hard into a sturdy someone who did not stagger or yield an inch.

Her mouth open to apologise, she turned quickly, a long hog's-hair brush in one hand, the palette and spare brushes in the other. A wisp of hair was falling in her eyes. There was a smear of viridian green on one cheek, and the faded painting-dress, daubed with many colours, hung in shapeless folds about her.

The blood rose in her clear cheeks as she saw who it was, and became conscious that Brenton Edwards was holding her at arm's length and looking at her—well, in the strangest fashion.

The next moment he was kissing her. She might have dropped her best, biggest brush into the sandy dirt, perhaps; she might even have jettisoned the palette, with its fresh and carefully mixed colours. Instead she submitted, stiffly at first, holding her cumbered hands at rigid right-angles. Then she sagged against him, lost, bewildered, given up to a new sensation.

'Devoured by tigers,' she thought confusedly. 'I shall die. I shall die . . .' But now he was kissing her gently and more gently, a series of soft kisses that seemed to be taking farewell of her outraged lips. When at last he let her go she swayed, dizzy as if she

had stood up too quickly after a long sleep.

He put out his arms to steady her; but as his head bent above her again she woke to reaction. Rage filled her at this insolent stranger who had made her forget time, place, self, until her personality seemed to be dissolving in his.

'She gripped the palette firmly and brought it down hard on his red-gold curls. "You beast!"

He laughed with the surprise of it, a loud roar of uninhibited laughter that woke the echoes like a chorus of kookaburras. This, and the loss of the good oil-paint now decorating his hair with streaks of flake-white, cobalt, crimson and yellow ochre, enraged her further.

"Oh, you—you—you——!" she stammered. Tears of rage stood in her eyes. She dashed them away with the back of her wrist.

"Come now, don't tell me you've never been kissed before," he said, clawing some of the paint out of his hair and stooping to wipe his fingers on a tuft of grass.

"Yes, but not like that! You know very well——"

'I thought—I didn't mean——"

"You thought I wouldn't mind! If a woman chooses to paint, or become an actress, or do anything unusual, you regard her as fair game; of course she must be immoral."

"No, really." The mocking smile went out of his eyes, and they looked at her seriously and intently. She noticed for the first time that they were a clear, vivid blue-green, the colour of the sea on the south coast. "I didn't mean any disrespect. I didn't think at all. I'm sorry. It was just that you crashed against me, and then you looked so sweet, with that funny old dress, and your hair coming down, and a smear of paint on your cheek. . . ."

She looked down at the 'funny old dress' to hide the softening in her face; she looked up under her straight brows, and suddenly she began to smile. "Do you know your hair is all the colours of the rainbow?"

"It was worth it." He smiled; she scowled, and turned her back on him. She began gathering up her things, packing paints back into her box, folding her easel, and slipping the wet canvas

into the special carrying attachment.

"Can I see the picture?"

"No. It's not finished. I'll have to try to finish it at home, and now the colours are all spoilt on the palette, I'll have the trouble of mixing them again." Her temper began to rise once more at the thought. "Oh, *why* did you have to come blundering down here and interrupting me when I'd nearly finished?"

"Well, after all, the *Philadelphia* is my home. I was just coming on board quietly when *you* blundered into *me*."

"Oh——!" She dipped a brush in a dipper of turpentine and wiped it vigorously on a rag.

"I wonder would you lend me a little of that? I don't believe there's any left on board."

She looked at his parti-coloured hair, hesitated, and poured some turpentine on to a piece of rag. "Here."

"Thanks." He took it and rubbed his hair while she cleaned the other brushes. The curls darkened, turned into ringlets, and glistened in the sun. She was conscious of an absurd wish to touch them, to run her fingers through them.

"Is that all right?"

"No, there's a large patch of cobalt over your left ear."

He rubbed ineffectually. She reflected that it would be embarrassing for her if anyone saw the paint in his hair. He was quite capable of explaining how he came by it.

"Here, let me." She poured some more turps on to a clean piece of rag. "Bend your head!" The worst of the colour came off, and she gave a good tweak to the tuft of hair.

"Ouch!"

"That didn't hurt."

"Not really, no." He smiled at her with shut mouth, his brilliant but rather small eyes half-closed: a considering look. She didn't like it.

'As if I were a picture and he was considering my tonal values,' she thought, instantly upon her dignity again. She hastily finished packing up. "Turn your back, please," she ordered.

He obediently swung round and contemplated the bank. She

TIME, FLOW SOFTLY

dragged off the painting-dress, disarranging her hair still more, and stuffed the dress into her satchel.

"Now good-bye, Mr. Edwards."

"But of course I'll carry your easel for you, Miss Gordon."

"No! I absolutely forbid it." And she marched off.

With a very slight shrug, he looked after her. Then he turned and crossed the gangplank to the *Philadelphia's* deck.

CHAPTER FOUR

Charles ordered his second rum and stood looking unseeingly at the rows of bottles in the dim bar of the Shamrock Hotel. He would have to go next door to Hamilton's in a minute and break the news to Delie; but at present he needed the fortifying warmth of spirits.

So Hester was dying! The doctor had made his diagnosis, and it was as bad as could be. Cancer in an advanced stage; no use to operate. She hadn't much longer to live.

He thought with remorse of his old attitude to Hester's confirmed invalidism, the feeling that her aches and pains and headaches were convenient ones that came on only when she was crossed, or wanted sympathy. Now they assumed a terrible significance.

He dreaded the thought of sick-room duties, the last hours, the suffering he would be forced to watch . . . Their marriage had ceased in all but name years ago, and yet she had once been his bride. And Hester flatly refused to go to hospital.

Delie—— No, she would be useless as a nurse, even if Hester would have her. He would get a trained nurse to live in. And Bella, old Bella was wonderful, so gentle and kind. Better than that sly Annie who had given notice, like a rat sensing trouble on a sinking ship, more than a month ago.

Delie fixed her eyes on the slow turning of the windmill, the glint and quiver of gum-leaves beyond the window. Her uncle

had just left, and she was trying to take in his news. Aunt Hester dying! And she had not been able to shed a tear.

It was as though some petrifying process had taken place in her emotions since Adam died. She felt nothing.

She hadn't even offered to give up her job, to go and nurse her aunt. What had she said? "I'll come and see her if you like."

Oh, generous offer! Her aunt had taken her in when she was an orphan in a strange land. She was her own mother's sister. Now she lay dying, tended by the black hands she despised.

Yet Delie knew she would be useless as a nurse. And what if Aunt Hester, in spite of her more friendly manner, still held the same fantastic suspicions about herself and Uncle Charles? No, she could never go back to the farm to live.

The little steamer *Julia* was struggling up-river, keeping close against the bank to avoid the current. The steady movement, the regular chuffing of the funnel and the *chunk, chunk, chunk* of the paddles lulled Delie into a peaceful state.

She watched in a dream the pale grey trunks of the big trees, the forests of saplings and the fallen logs slip by, and the shallow, steeply-sloping banks zebra-striped with sun and shadow.

The sand of the banks, gripped by the hand-like roots of great flooded gums, was a warm yellow; the shadows were indigo. Half-closing her eyes to appreciate the tones, she saw a ghostly fence, as of pale wire-netting, in front of the trees. On opening them again, she found that it was the high-water mark from last year's flood, showing at the same level on all the trunks. For some reason it had left a white rather than a muddy deposit where the trees had been under water.

Suddenly a grassy clearing swam into sight, then the grey posts and rails of the sheepyards. They had arrived.

Here she was back in the landscape of her past, as if she had travelled in time as well as space. Every tree and bush, the curve of the river sweeping round the bend, the angle of the trees leaning above it, spoke of a happiness that was gone.

Going up through the garden, she welcomed old friends: the

vine-arbour where they used to have dinner on hot days, the pine tree she used to climb to get away from her aunt, the scented jasmine burdening the veranda with a mass of fragile stems and trailing white stars.

And there was the veranda-rail, worn and grey, that was so mixed into her most tender and painful memories that she swerved away, thinking, 'No, I can't bear any more just now.' She went instead down the side of the house to the back door.

The dogs greeted her with wild barking. Old Bella, fat and comfortable-looking as ever, burst out of the kitchen with her brown hands outstretched, her dark eyes alight with pleasure.

"Craikey, Miss 'Delphia, you all-a-same grown-up young lady!"

"Well, it's been nearly three years, Bella." Holding the cook's hands in a warm clasp, she thought how Bella looked exactly the same; but she guessed that the kitchen did not shine as before now that Hester was not in charge. She had made the trip specially to oversee the cooking of dinner next day in honour of the minister, who was coming out to give her aunt Holy Communion.

"And how is Jacky and everybody? And Lucy—is she still about?"

"No more. Juss plurry black fella, that one," said Bella with scorn. "Her live all-a-time longa camp, longa river!"

"And Minna? You hear how Minna is lately?"

"No good, Miss 'Delphia. Her close-up finish, longa mission. Pewmonia, Jacky say."

A young lubra, about the age Minna had been when they first came to the farm, with the same bright dark eyes and attractive figure, came to the kitchen door and shyly withdrew again.

"Delie! There you are!" cried Charles from the house door. "Come in, child, your aunt has been getting worked up in case you'd missed the steamer."

Delie followed down the familiar passage with a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. She had to face Hester in the front bedroom which she had not entered since the day Adam died. She feared and hated illness; and how was she to greet her former

energy, doomed to incurable illness and a lingering death? How would Hester greet her?

But she need not have worried. Hester fell naturally into her old style: "Come in, come in, child, it's ages since I heard the steamer at the landing, where on earth have you been? I told Charles to see if you'd arrived, but he would fuss about putting my bed-jacket on and moving the pillows and the flowers and goodness knows what . . . Where that nurse is or what she's doing with herself is beyond me——"

"She's getting your lunch ready in the kitchen," Charles interposed quietly.

"They're all the same, there's Annie that I trained to do everything just as I like goes and leaves me when I need her, because she was restless after old Lijah died, but what did she expect but to be left a widow, marrying an old fellow like that, I'd like to know? Now, I've got the minister coming out tomorrow to give me Holy Communion, and I know you don't like housework, but at least I taught you how things should be done. Will you watch over Bella for me, and see that the meal is dished up properly? For of course we'll have to ask him to midday dinner after that long drive."

"Yes, aunt," said Delie. She felt as if she were twelve years old again, and all that had passed since had never been. Hester did not seem so very changed. Her voice seemed strong, her face was still ruddy with its network of red veins, though the cheeks had sunken in a little, and the once piercing black eyes were lacklustre and filmed at the edges of the iris.

Only a trace of grey showed in the straight black hair. Delie felt cheered. This did not look like a doomed person; the doctor must be mistaken.

"Have you much pain?" she asked. "I was so sorry to—hear—that it has become worse . . . That is, to—to find you in bed——" she floundered.

"Yes, it's worse; much worse," said Hester, with a half-pleased, triumphant air. "I knew there was something there. Nobody knows what I've suffered." But the old fretful whine had gone out of the phrase; Hester, in becoming the centre of anxious

attention, had achieved some kind of happiness at last.

That afternoon, in a fit of remorse over her laziness and unhelpfulness in the old days, Delie organised Bella in a thorough house-cleaning, down to the brass candle-brackets on the piano. A duck was already dressed for the next day's dinner, and Bella was instructed to make golden pudding, which she could be trusted to turn out perfectly.

The nostalgic sound of clucking hens, the clank of the windmill pumping water up from the river, woke Delie with a sense of contentment in her old room.

Then she realised with dismay that she had dreamt not of Adam, but of Brenton Edwards. She had not seen him since the day by the river bank; she had kept away from the *Philadelphia*, though she had seen Tom several times in the town, and she tried not to think of Brenton. But although she banished him from her conscious mind, the mate would appear in dreams; always larger than life, gay, golden-haired, vital and disturbing. When Mr. Polson arrived in the house sulky, half an hour late for one o'clock dinner, he seemed a pallid spectre beside the vivid dream-Brenton.

He was nervous and apologetic and voluble. The floods were so bad on the low road that he had been forced to come the long way round, and he feared he had kept the poor patient sufferer waiting.

Hester in fact had had no breakfast or lunch, so that no profane food should pass her lips before the symbolic body and blood of her Saviour; but as she had little appetite it was no hardship.

At the same time she had felt she should refuse her usual sedative, and the nagging pain (getting a little worse with each week that passed) had begun to worry her.

Hearing of this fortitude from the nurse, Mr. Polson cried, "I will administer the Sacrament to this brave sufferer at once; but by all means let her take a sedative first, that she may be in a state of grace to receive it."

"It won't take effect immediately," said Hester, taking the powder gratefully, "so please go and have your dinner. I don't

want mine yet, anyway. It will distress me far more to think of my good roast duck spoiling in the oven, than to wait while you eat. Go on, do."

Delie, coming in with some freshly-picked jasmine in a crystal vase, heard for the first time a note of weariness, of weakness in the harsh voice. "Yes, it's already dished up," she said, noticing that Mr. Polson showed signs of interest at the mention of roast duck. "Not cooked as perfectly as Auntie would have done it, but as good as may be. Do come on." And at her smile the minister's pale face flushed to the roots of his pale hair. Hester lay back and closed her eyes, a faint smile on her lips.

The duck was all that Hester could have wished. Charles, stimulated by all this unusual company, conversed and carved with a flourish. But when the steamed pudding was brought in a hush fell on them all. The outside edges looked light and appetising, but the middle had caved in. Raw pudding was oozing over the plate in a gluey yellow mass.

"Oh, Bella!" cried Delie as the cook made hastily for the door. "The pudding—did it go off the boil?"

"No more, Miss 'Delphia. Him boil too-much, boil all-a-time. Mine tinkit too much pflour longa belly that one puddin. Mine tinkit Mr. Powlson likem big-pfella puddin."

"Very well, Bella; never mind. Bring some jam and the loaf of new bread."

She looked at the minister, ready to catch his eye and laugh at this simple tribute to his supposed appetite for pudding. But he was gazing pointedly out the window; his ears were pink. The word 'belly' not in a Biblical context was scarcely fit for mixed company. These natives were really very crude, he thought.

Charles and Delie exchanged an understanding grin. The nurse stolidly ate bread and butter. "Scrape me a bit off the outside, I like 'em soggy," said Charles.

"Don't breathe a word about it to Aunt Hester, will you?"

"I won't." He gave her a conspirator's wink.

The nurse was a taciturn person, middle-aged, heavy-faced, with circles under her eyes and a tightly-compressed mouth. She seemed to bear some secret grudge against life. Delie would not,

she felt, like to be helpless in her hands. But Charles had said she was an excellent nurse.

She said little at table, only showing a flash of life when Mr. Polson mentioned the church choir. "I used to sing in a choir in Melbourne, once. I had a good contralto voice," she said, and lapsed into silence again.

Charles looked at her with new interest. "Mine is a tenor," he said. "I've been told it's quite good; if only I had had the training. . . ."

While Delie helped to clear away the profane repast, the minister took out the symbols of the ritual feast, the consecrated bread and wine, the holy chalice; and donned the white surplice and embroidered stole of his office.

He suddenly took on the ancient dignity of the Church, and became impressive. He really looked distinguished, she thought, with his pale, fine hair and thin features above the white robe, and his deep-set, fanatical eyes.

A small table covered with a clean white cloth was carried into the sick-room, with the paraphernalia of the ritual set out upon it.

Delie knelt in the room and took a physical part in the service, but her mind strayed. She noticed that the minister had well-shaped hands and the nails were beautifully kept, but the high, nasal sing-song he adopted when praying meant no more to her than the singing of the crickets outside the window, as he began the Prayer for the Sick:

"O Father of mercies, and God of all comfort, our only help in time of need: We fly unto Thee for succour in behalf of this Thy servant, here lying . . . in great weakness of body . . ."

After the service, Hester was left alone with her spiritual adviser. Delie went out to the kitchen and helped to butter some hot scones. She came back to ask Mr. Polson if he would take a cup of tea before starting on the long drive back.

"There's no reason why the Reverend shouldn't go the short way," said Charles, coming in as the minister was protesting that he would have to leave at once.

"Oh, you must stay for afternoon tea," said Hester.

"The river's not rising, according to my mark it's quite

stationary, and not as high as when I've been through many a time with Barney. It's just a matter of knowing the track—or having a horse that knows it."

"Delie knows the low road," said Hester. "Philadelphia, you could pilot Mr. Polson through the blazed trees, and save yourself the cost of the trip back to Echuca."

Delie agreed eagerly. Not only would she save her steamer fare, but she felt a longing to travel that way again, through a silent, flooded world under the huge grey trees.

Mr. Polson interpreted her eagerness differently. He looked startled and pleased. "We should leave as soon as possible, then, to be sure of reaching town before dark," he said with a little cough.

"Nonsense, there's time for a cup of tea," Hester spoke with almost her old briskness. "Delie, go and pack while the minister has his tea."

CHAPTER FIVE

Jacky had shut the gate behind them, they were through the pine-tree paddock and entering the borders of the red-gum forest, when Mr. Polson remarked with his melancholy-impressive air: "Your aunt is a brave sufferer, Miss Gordon."

"Yes," said Delie shortly. Then, with an effort, "She has told you that she's dying?"

"Ah, yes." He adjusted his black hat with his free hand, holding the reins with the other. "But she is truly resigned; a thoroughly Christian woman. She looks forward to meeting her son again in Heaven."

Delie was silent. She stared straight ahead under her little toque of cherry velvet, trimmed with satin ribbon. The wind of their movement had brought a tinge of colour to her pale face. She folded her gloved hands tightly and said somberly, "I wish I could be as sure as that."

"Ah, you have doubts, Miss Gordon?"

He said it as though doubts were an infectious disease, like mumps or measles. He turned questioningly towards her, but her eyes were on her gloves. He noted the delicate colour in the cheek nearest to him, the black wing of her brow, and swallowed rapidly.

"Sometimes I have no doubts at all. On the contrary, I feel quite sure . . . that there is nothing beyond!"

"Ah, Miss Gordon, you do not know what you say! All doubts are resolved in the light of Faith. It shall all be made clear to us one day. Meanwhile, we must let our steps be guided by One who knows all things."

This seemed both wordy and vague to her. She looked up at the pale, distant sky, cut into small sections of irregular blue by the grey tops of the trees. The trees were enormous in their grey indifference, to both the ants swarming on their trunks and the human beings who passed between.

"You mean," she said, "that God knows about disease and suffering, yet does nothing about it? Or that he *can* do nothing about it?"

"There is a reason for all things, Miss Gordon. We cannot comprehend the mighty plan. We can only pray."

But she thought obstinately, 'Pray to what? And how do we know our prayers are heard?'

Ahead lay a great, still sheet of water, spread under the trees, hiding the road they had to follow. The marks on the blazed trees alone showed the track. Water bubbled through the turning wheels, and Delie began to dream, imagining that she was driving this way again with Adam. As the parrots whistled, dipped and swung in the trees, she half-expected his whistle beside her, imitating their call: "*Poi-poi-poi! Tin-tin-tin-tin!*" She stole a glance at her companion. He was jerking the reins and gazing round uneasily.

She was jolted against him by the horse plunging and rearing suddenly. They had entered the first creek-crossing, and he did not like the deeper water. With a lurch and a sway they were out the other side.

Delie looked back with a worried expression. The water was

higher than she had expected from her uncle's account, and she had also noticed that the creek was flowing backwards, carrying small pieces of debris from the river. This meant that the main channel was backing up into the creeks; the river was rising, whether with a major flood or only a temporary fresh it was impossible to tell.

They went on, the horse showing signs of uneasiness, snorting and flicking back his ears.

"Is it really usual to drive this way with the floodwaters at such a height, Miss Gordon?"

"Well, they are a little higher than I expected. There's evidently been a rise, in fact I think the water's still rising. We can only keep on as fast as possible."

They drove on in silence, while the patches of sky far above began to lose their blue and become flushed with gold. When they came to the next creek, where the water could be seen moving quite swiftly up from the river, the horse stopped dead.

"Gee-up, you wretched creature! Gee-up!" cried Mr. Polson, slapping the reins on its back. But the horse put its ears back and stood still.

"Perhaps he knows best," suggested Delie.

"You said we must keep going." He took the whip out of its socket and lashed nervously at the horse, at the same time pulling hard on the reins. The horse reared and backed, breaking the swingle-bar.

"Now we'll *have* to stay put," said Delie, feeling a detached resignation.

"The fool of a horse!" cried Mr. Polson. Twilight was now descending on the red-gum forest, the trees looked dark against the pale sky. The last kookaburra laughed, as though mocking their plight. Then utter silence reigned. The water began to rise over the floor of the sulky.

"We'd better climb out while there's still enough light to see what we're doing," said Delie.

"But we can't stay here all night!"

She shrugged. "Even if you could mend the swingle-bar, it

would be madness to go on in darkness with the water rising. There are still two more creeks to cross."

"Oh, I should never have come this way, never!"

There was a limb from a great fallen tree rising out of the water and stretching above her head. Standing up, she managed to grasp this and swing herself on to it, and clamber from there to where there was a comfortable fork to wedge herself in.

As she settled down and looked about at the wide sweep of waters, wondering how much more they would rise, she was reminded of the night she had spent on a ledge in the seaside cave with Tom, her first night in Australia.

Her companion was very different this time; and how poorly he showed up in these primitive surroundings! The delicate balancing of a tea-cup, the polishing of a phrase, were of little use here. Climbing up with difficulty to another forked branch, he kept muttering about how unfortunate it was that they had not gone by the high road.

"I felt all along that the other was not safe . . . I can't think how your uncle——"

He hunched himself up, looking like a disgruntled, roosting bird, to wait for the dawn.

At last, after what seemed like many years of darkness, a grey light showed behind the trees. He began to clamber down towards the water, moving stiffly and cautiously. The water-level seemed to have risen no further since they had abandoned the sulky, had even fallen a little, judging by the marks on the trees.

Mr. Polson announced that he would try to mend the swingle-bar and lead the horse across the creek. The horse meanwhile, when left to himself, had drawn the sulky sideways after him to a higher piece of ground, which he had found by some instinct under the endless level of the floodwaters.

"Oh, be careful!" cried Delie, setting the minister, still wearing his smart black hat, move down the far side of the huge fallen tree which had given them shelter. "How do you know where the creek is in this light?"

"I put my faith in God!" returned Mr. Polson magnificently. "He will guide my feet in the right path; I am in His hands."

The chorus of kookaburras which had begun with the first light now reached a crescendo; the whole forest seemed to ring with wild, mocking laughter.

He climbed down into the water, which came up to his waist; took two steps forward, and disappeared. Only his black hat was left floating on the surface. In a few moments his head reappeared, looking thin and narrow with its flattened, streaming hair, before he grabbed the hat and jammed it on again. Then, floundering and splashing, he spouted a Psalm between gasps for breath:

"Save me—O God, for the waters—are come into my soul. I sink—in deep mire—where there is—no standing. I am come—into deep waters—where the floods overflow me . . ."

At this stage his sinking feet encountered firm ground at the edge of the creek. Fortunately the water was no longer flowing either up or down: as Delie knew, the floods were most dangerous in a falling river, when the waters swept down the creeks back to the river.

She had not been able to feel much sympathy for Mr. Polson; she thought he would have been wiser to have felt ahead of him with a stick, as well as putting his faith in God. Now she found it hard not to laugh, as with his ridiculously respectable hat jammed upon his lank hair he waded laboriously towards the sulky.

Rather to her surprise, he brought a pocket-knife out from somewhere; it seemed an unexpectedly masculine adjunct for him.

He spoke to the cold and dejected horse, examined the broken swingle-bar, and cut a piece of leather from the reins to bind around and mend it. The reins were then too short. Delie took off her cherry-coloured toque which she had kept on all night for warmth (and she must have looked just as silly as he did, she reflected, roosting in a tree in the middle of a flooded forest with a fashionable hat on her head). She looked at the ruchings of satin ribbon, just the width of the reins.

"The very thing!" she cried, tearing off the ribbon.

When he had mended the reins and led horse and sulky over

to the tree, he held her hand while she stepped back to the seat. The water had gone down in the night, and the sulky floor was dry. She had not even got her feet wet.

A beam of pale gold was tinting the very tops of the trees; the floodwaters gleamed with reflected light from the sky.

"It looks quite festive," she said, looking at the be-ribboned reins.

"Quite," he said shortly.

He was extremely wet and uncomfortable, and beginning to shiver. Her air of enjoying the adventure irritated him profoundly. She, though cold and cramped, was not wet. She took off the three-quarter-length cape which made the top half of her costume, and handed it to him.

"If you were to take off your wet things and wrap yourself in this——"

"Take them off!" He looked scandalised.

"Just your—your top things."

"Certainly not!" But he took the cape and wrapped it about him with a Roman air.

Delie felt the cold of their movement through her thin blouse, but the sun was shining, and she felt the excitement of travelling through the fresh dawn after the long and anxious night that had seemed so interminable. Kookaburras rollicked in the trees, parrots whistled, white cockatoos flew up dazzlingly into the sun.

As they came out into the long straight avenue through the red-gums that led to Moama and the bridge, Mr. Polson became uneasy, glancing back over his shoulder. Here they might meet some other traffic. He twitched off the cape and handed it back with a mumble of thanks.

The lining was wet, so she put it on inside out.

"You're surely not contemplating going into Echuca like that?" He glanced at the dragged lining, the once-smart hat in her hand with long threads of cotton dangling where the ribbon had been sewn, her hair falling from its pins.

"But why ever not? One can't expect to look very smart after spending a night in a tree!"

"Let us hope this—misadventure will not be generally known,"

he said, lowering his voice as if the trees might be listening. "I will have to explain my condition, but there's no need to mention that you were with me. You may trust me to be silent on the matter. But even so, Miss Gordon—Miss Philadelphia, I want you to know that of course you will have the protection of my name, if necessary."

"But—but—you mean——?"

"I mean that I would marry you," he said, patting her hand kindly. "It is a very compromising situation for a young lady to be in. Though I do think your aunt——"

"It is very kind of you, Mr. Polson, but——"

"Certainly your aunt seemed very anxious for me to drive you. Come now, admit that you knew very well that the water was higher than any of you let on!" And he shook his head at her with an attempt at a roguish smile, which with his blue, pinched-looking features and lank wet hair had an unfortunate effect.

"Mr. Polson!" Delie burst in, as she grasped his meaning. "My dear man, I wouldn't marry you if you crawled from here to Echuca on your knees to ask me. I wouldn't marry you——"

"There is no need to be insulting, Miss Gordon."

"But the idea, the very idea of thinking I had laid a trap for you, that Auntie and I had it all planned out . . . Oh no, it's too funny!" And she began to laugh, in young, merry peals that were lost among the miles of silent trees.

A flush crept up in the minister's cheeks and gave a little more life to his face. He shook the reins and urged on the horse as though he could not be rid of her soon enough. His lips were tightly compressed.

As soon as they had crossed the bridge, where the sleepy Customs men did not attempt to stop the well-known church sulky, he pulled up on the outskirts of the town.

"If you have no thought for your own reputation, you might at least consider mine," he said coldly. "If you will leave me here, it's possible that we may be able to keep this—this unfortunate episode a secret. May I trust you to be discreet?"

"Yes, yes," she said impatiently. "Do go on home and get into some dry clothes now. I'm afraid you've caught a chill."

"Not a—atCHOO!—at all," he said aloofly. "But if you don't mind I will bid you good-bye now." He helped her down, climbed back into the sulky, and lifted the damp hat from his wet hair with a dignified gesture.

His expression was baffled and hurt, but his manners were perfect. With the cherry ribbons gleaming gaily in the morning sun, the sulky disappeared round a corner.

CHAPTER SIX

When the South African War broke out, it was just something in the paper, like an earthquake in Japan or an uprising in Bolivia; not of the first importance to the pleasure-loving young people with whom Delie now spent her week-ends.

She played tennis, went on dray picnics and steam-er excursions and to balls and tea-parties. She knew that she was considered 'fast', and that the mammas of eligible young men did not approve of her.

Among Bessie's set her position was unusual. First, she earned her own living. Then she lived alone, which was not quite 'nice', she was an orphan, and she did not have much money. In the eyes of Society she was trebly damned.

It was partly her own fault, for she cared little for conventions. The two young men who vied with each other to be her escort were not slow to take advantage of this; and when one of them managed to kiss her in a quiet corner, he boasted of it to the other, and embroidered the extent of his conquest, so that each became progressively a little more daring.

Delie accepted all this with a detached amusement. Neither of them could rouse in her the flood of feeling that Adam had, or even stir her to anger as Brenton Edwards had done . . . Coolly she noted their growing excitement and enslavement. It was a game to which she could call a halt whenever she felt inclined.

Returning in the *Lancashire Lass* from an excursion to Stewart's Bridge, on a calm Sunday evening, with the string band playing

and the tree-lined banks gliding past like the visible flow of time, she would suddenly feel the need to be alone. The delicate sky-colours reflected in the still water, and folded into endless glassy curves in the wake; the very shape of the soft dark trees against the skyline filled her with an emotion she could not express. She wanted to expand through all the visible world; she was the river, and the endless flow, and the soft, limitless sky. The pressure of the young people about her, their talk and laughter, created a tension until she felt like a boiler about to burst; soon she must scream or cry.

"Leave me alone, John," she would say to the anxious young man who had noticed her white face and strained expression. "I'm stifling. I think I'm going to faint." And she would insist on being left alone in the stern, to stare her eyes full. Thus grew up the second legend about Philadelphia Gordon: besides being 'fast' she was 'delicate', and healthy, strong young men felt an urge to look after and protect her.

Her highest moments came when she was alone, or when she was painting; yet she loved company and could be as gay and foolish as any young thing. She flung herself into picnics and balls with thoughtless enjoyment, until suddenly it would all fall away from her. She would stand apart and stare as the whirling figures on the dance floor became as unreal as puppets in a marionette-show, while a terrible sadness descended upon her, objectless and profound. Or she would slip away from a noisy picnic to stand on the brink of the river, whose endless onward glide filled her with melancholy while it yet harmonised with something unresting in her own spirit.

It was the river, more than any person, that bound her to Echuca; the ancient river of the blackfellows' legend that came down out of the high places after the old woman and her magic Snake, and followed its winding course across half a continent, to end on a faraway coast.

There was not a soul in the town to whom she could really talk and open her inmost thoughts. There was something hollow about Daniel Wise, and the boys she went out with she could not take seriously. It came as a shock to her to realise suddenly that

they were men, about to take their part in a man's world. For Kevin Hodge, coming shyly to her office door one morning in a new khaki uniform, announced that he was having his picture taken before leaving for South Africa.

He had been in training with the militia for some time, and was to go with the next contingent from Victoria. Two others, George Barrett and Tony Wisden, were going too.

She was dismayed, shaken with apprehension for his young defencelessness against those huge and horrid Boers about whom she read such frightening tales. It seemed unfair that Kevin, with his smooth pink cheeks and dark eyes fringed with long lashes like a girl's, should be sent away to fight them.

She promised to give him a picture of herself to take to South Africa.

Two weeks later she was sitting in her room after dinner, making a study of her own left hand in crayon, when a tap came at her door. It was her landlady, smirking rather unpleasantly, to announce a visitor—a young man.

Surprised (for she had seen Kevin only on Sunday night, and John, the other young man, was away in Melbourne), she ran downstairs. Kevin was waiting nervously just inside the front door. The pupils of his eyes were dilated so that they looked intensely black, and his girlish cheeks were flushed.

"Delie! Can you come out for a while?"

"Out? But I'm rather tired, Kev. And I should be working at my sketches—"

"Never mind. Get a coat, and come."

She hesitated for a moment, conscious of the disapproving stare of the landlady somewhere in the background. Then the suppressed excitement in his manner conveyed itself to her, her tiredness disappeared in a moment, and with a brief "Wait outside for me," she flew up the stairs, slipped on a long coat, and wound a filmy 'fascinator' about her throat and hair.

Kevin was waiting tensely. He came to her quickly, and took her arm in a hot, nervous grip. He was sturdy, not very tall, and they walked in perfect unison; the movement of their feet, their

legs, the swing of their hips was a pleasure felt all down their sides. They walked along High Street to the end, and towards the ornate red-gum arch that marked the entrance to the park. Delie stiffened and drew back. "Not there, Kev!"

"Where then? I want to say good-bye to you properly. Do you know why I brought you out? We're leaving almost at once, the day after tomorrow. I've brought you my picture." He handed her the stiff cardboard print, and in the dim gaslight she could see his young, fresh face smile confidently out at her from beneath the army hat turned up at the side. She tucked it away in her sleeve.

"Let's go back the other way, along the river."

"Towards the bridge? All right, but hurry," he grumbled. "I want to get away from people where I can kiss you."

She gave his arm a little squeeze. His excitement had roused a recklessness in her. What if anyone saw her walking alone with a young man in the dark streets, towards the lonely scrub by the river? She had no reputation to lose, anyway.

They turned down beside the silent foundry, and just above the wharf, where a train with a long line of goods trucks was shunting, they came in sight of the dwindled summer river, with stars swimming on its calm expanse. Below the steep banks there was a wide space for walking which would be under water when the floods came down.

There was no sound but the echoing call of a wild duck or water-hen in the reeds on the far bank. The river slid by with silent, unhurried motion. Kevin held her hand and led the way until they had drawn well away from the town, and passed beneath the big cement pillars of the bridge; then he led her back a little from the water's edge, took off his coat and spread it over the springy bushes, and sat her gently upon it. He knelt before her and gazed at her dim, pale face in the double starlight reflected from water and sky.

"You'll be cold!" she protested.

"No, I'm burning. Give me your little hands to hold."

"They're not little." She felt inclined to giggle. "They're large and clumsy."

He took her hands and pressed them against his thin shirt, so that she could feel the strong beating of his heart.

"I wish I could make your heart beat like that."

"Perhaps you could." Oh, why did she say these stupid, meaningless, coquettish things? Her heart was dead, and buried in Adam's grave.

"Could I? . . . Could I?" he whispered; his breath hot on her ear. She kept her head averted, but his lips came seeking softly after hers, his young soft mouth enclosed her own, and she sighed with dreamy pleasure; yet her pulse kept up its even beat.

As in a dream she felt his hands explore her softness and warmth. She had never seemed so beautiful to herself, it was as if she had never known she had a body before; it was revealed only under his delicately searching fingers. At last she thrust him away and sat up, the scarf falling about her shoulders, her hair slipping from its knot.

"Delie! Delie! I love you." She was touched by the eager trembling of his voice, but she moved farther away from him.

"But I don't love you, Kevin."

"But you must, you must, just a little! Why did you come?"

"I'm sorry you're going away, and you wanted to say good-bye. Now I must really get back, or I'll be locked out."

"You won't let me say good-bye to you properly." His mouth was sulky, he flung himself down and buried his face in his arms.

She was moved by his small boy's attitude, and in the dim light the shape of his head, the thick hair, looked like Adam's. She was sharply reminded of that moonlit night when she had refused Adam, and sent him to his death.

And this boy, too, was probably going to his death. . . . She put out a hand and stroked the thick dark hair. He grasped it and kissed the fingers, palm and wrist. When he drew her down again beside him she did not resist.

They were both very young, very inexperienced; but Delie had enough knowledge to realise that little had really happened, that she did not need to fear a fate like Minna's. They walked back almost in silence, his arm close about her, their bodies moving in unison down the quiet street.

He kissed her long and insistently outside the door. "Let me come up with you," he murmured. "Let me stay with you all night."

She shook her head firmly. She was beginning to feel rather amazed at herself. It had all been unimportant, almost as if happening to someone else. "It's impossible, Kev. I'm sorry."

But as she went up to bed she felt warm and molten, as if some hard shield of metal about her heart had softened and run.

She sat down on the edge of the bed, unwinding the fascinator thoughtfully from her disarranged hair. Then she went to the drawer and took out a small print she'd had made from the large portrait in the blue gown. (Mr. Hamilton had asked her to tint one of these; and it was such a success that it now stood in the studio window to attract customers.)

She put the picture Kevin had given her carefully away in the drawer, and wrapped the other to give him. Then she flung herself down on the bed and stared at the ceiling. Would she ever really love anyone again? She would write Kevin long letters at the front, she would knit him khaki socks and send him books; she would be a sister to him, but that was all.

Before the dwindled summer river stopped all traffic, Delie had a letter delivered to her by one of the last paddle-steamers to get in to Echuca—and she had taken ten days to come up from Swan Hill, warping over all the bad patches. The letter came from Bourke, away in the far west of New South Wales. With a sudden inexplicable excitement, which made her tear the letter anyhow from its envelope, she turned to the rather cramped signature of a man not used to holding a pen. As she had expected: Brenton Edwards. He wrote in a careless, schoolboyish hand. She turned over the pages and felt the inked words with her fingers, as though they had a physical life of their own. She smoothed back the letter and began at the beginning.

Dear Miss Gordon,

I am sending this letter by hand, with a mate of mine, as I don't trust the mails, but I do trust the skipper of the *Kelpie* to

get through to Echuca if its at all possible. It is bad news I have to tell you, I'm afraid.

It's about poor old Tom. He was checking the engine when Charlie wasn't too good, and in stepping over the paddle-shaft got his trouser-leg caught in a cleat we use for winching sometimes. His leg was torn off before anyone could do anything. We just got him to Bourke in time to die in hospital.

Well, he was always scared of ending up in an Old Men's Home where they wouldn't let him chew baccy or swear. He's safe from that, anyway.

Delie skipped ahead a few lines and saw: "So now you are the owner of a paddle-steamer—half a steamer, anyway . . ." It seemed that Tom had always meant to leave the *Philadelphia* to her, and he'd been conscious long enough to sign a paper leaving her his share. Brenton Edwards had taken over as skipper, as he had his master's ticket. They would probably be discharging at Swan Hill this year.

You'll be glad to know, that Tom did not suffer too much at the end, he was very weak with the shock and loss of blood and just seemed to fall asleep. I made a cross out of the *Philadelphia's* steering-pole, he was that proud of her I thought he'd like to keep a piece of her near, even though she killed him.

Before she had properly taken in the sense of the words, she had noticed unwillingly one or two spelling mistakes, a slip of grammar. She had wondered so much what sort of a letter he would write! But it was a good letter, it showed more sensibility than she would have expected of him.

Then the sense of the letter swept over her. The *Philadelphia* was hers; or half hers, anyway. And Tom—dear, kindly, rough, generous Tom—was no more.

Delie sat still in her little office, and felt a slow, hot tear fall on the hand that held the letter. Dear old Tom, to have escaped the sea, and then come to such an end! She groped for her handkerchief, that was always stained with Prussian blue, sepia and

vermillion. This was only the second time she had cried in years—the other time was when the three Echuca boys left by train to join their contingent in Melbourne. And it was not for them she had wept, but for herself; the hot hissing engine, trembling with leashed power, the crowd, the flags, the stirring music of the band, had filled her with a wild discontent, a longing to be a man and setting off for the other side of the world.

She had always wished she had been born a boy; she had always wanted to own a paddle-steamer, and now she had half her wish. She ran her fingers again over the close-written pages. Yes, it was a good letter; human feeling was more important than grammar. She felt a longing to see the *Philadelphia* again, at once. Discharging at Swan Hill! That was 200 miles away downstream. There was nothing to be done but wait patiently for the winter and the river's annual rise.

When her uncle came in the next day to see her she bounded up from her table, full of the importance of her news, eager to show him that her investment of fifty pounds, which Charles had always regarded so doubtfully, had repaid her ten per cent.

One look at his face made her bite back the eager words. "What is it? Is Aunt Hester worse?"

"Yes, dear. The end is—mercifully—very near. She suffers a great deal now, and she's not easy in her mind either. It's been a strain listening to her these last few weeks. It's dreadful, it's—" His lips quivered a little out of control; he groped for the packing-case and sat down.

Delie felt ashamed; she had almost forgotten her aunt's illness. Charles had come to ask her to return to the farm and stay until the end. Hester wanted to see her, seemed anxious to make her peace before it was too late, and she needed nursing for twenty-four hours a day now. It was too much for the one nurse.

When Charles had gone Delie asked Mr. Hamilton for indefinite leave.

"Your aunt, eh?" he said doubtfully, tilting back his head to

look at her through his pince-nez. "Hasn't she any daughters of her own?"

"Oh no, Mr. Hamilton! I'm a sort of adopted daughter, she brought me up since I was twelve when I lost my own mother and father, and then her only son was killed" (how easily she could say it now, without the old bitter constriction of the throat!) "and she has no one but me. My mother was her sister, and—"

"All right, all right," he said drily. "Come back as soon as you can."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Beyond the half-drawn curtains at the french windows the summer sun beat down upon the land. Glassy in the heat, scarcely moving between its steep banks, the river mirrored the blue sky and leaning trees in an imaged world as perfect in detail as the real one. Though the water of which the mirror was made slowly passed away and was replaced by new water from above the bend, the reflection did not change; but like the rainbow on the waterfall remained constant, always different in its components yet always apparently the same.

Delie moved restlessly to the windows and looked out, then back at her aunt. Beside the bed the lamp now burned day and night, and meant more to the sick woman, whose whole world had narrowed to these four walls, than the rising and setting of the sun.

In the lamplight her yellow, waxen skin seemed stretched over the bones, so that nose and forehead had a new prominence, while the eyes were sunk deep in their sockets. She turned her head wearily, and asked, "Did you say it was moonlight, dear? A lovely clear night?"

"Yes, Auntie." The night before she had mentioned that it was full moon. Now it was broad day, the blaze of noon filled the garden, shadows were at their smallest and blackest; but of what use to say so?

"Would you like a drink?" she asked instead.

"Yes . . . I think so. When can I have my sleeping-powder?"

"You just had it, Auntie, half an hour ago. Is the pain bad?"

"Yes, it's very bad." Her mouth, before rather loose and red-lipped, had become compressed, turned down in an expression of bitter resignation, the lips a thin line. Delie held the glass to them. Her aunt's fingers, yellowish, waxen, curled weakly about the glass without being able to hold its weight.

Hester began to fling her head from side to side on the pillow, as if trying to escape. Now and then a moan came from her, or a cry: "Oh God, have mercy!"

Delie rushed from the room to get the nurse, who had been having her morning tea. She walked briskly up the passage, her stiff apron rustling, adjusting her starched cuffs.

"It's not as bad as it sounds, you know," she said. "They make a lot of fuss, that's all."

Delie looked at the small, tight mouth, the heavy jowl, the eyes deep-sunken and ringed with shadow. What had life done to this woman? She looked like one who had received no mercy, and meant to give none.

"Oh Nurse, I want my medicine. It's bad, it's very bad today."

"You had it half an hour ago, Mrs. Jamieson."

"But give me some more, just one more. The doctor doesn't know, one doesn't help any more."

"I couldn't take the responsibility. In three hours—"

"Three hours!" Hester began to cry weakly.

"I will take the responsibility," said Delie, picking up the packet of opiates from the washstand.

"Give me those!" The nurse snatched them from her hand. "I am in charge here, Miss Gordon." She slipped the package into the pocket of her apron. Her face was stony.

Fortunately the doctor was due on one of his infrequent visits that afternoon. Blessedly soon after the injection he gave her, the tortured twisting of the features, the flinging of the head from side to side, the helpless moans had stopped, and Hester sank into a heavy-breathing sleep.

Delie spoke to him as she went with him out to his sulky, telling him what had happened that morning and asking him to leave some stronger opiate.

"I told her she would be more comfortable in hospital," he said rather impatiently, drawing on his yellow gloves. "She wouldn't hear of it, and now she's too weak to be moved."

"Surely, though, the sooner it's over the better? There's no hope of recovery, is there?"

"None."

"Then why can't you give her some help? You wouldn't let a dog suffer like that, you'd put it out of misery."

"I've increased the dose; but if you increase it too soon it loses its power, and the only dose effective for the pain would also be lethal. And that we haven't the right to give. In the eyes of the law—"

"The law! What does the law know about suffering?"

He shrugged his heavy shoulders and climbed into the sulky. "At least it won't be long now. She's very weak."

For a while Hester seemed better; though so painfully thin she did not seem to be in pain, but slept easily and woke with a more tranquil expression than Delie had ever seen on her face—that detached, faraway look of one who is about to leave the world.

Towards evening she was alone in the room with her aunt when she woke, and Delie was almost startled at the mild and loving look Hester bent upon her. "Charlotte!" she cried suddenly, loud and clear.

"What is it, Auntie? It's me, Delie."

"Oh! Child, I thought you were your mother for a moment. I've been dreaming, dreaming, dreaming . . ."

"You've had a good sleep."

"I'll go to sleep for the last time soon. Then I'll see Lottie again, and Adam. They're waiting for me over there, on the other side of the river. It won't be long now."

Delie looked silently at the floor.

"I wanted to say to you, it was why I asked Charles to bring you here, that I—I was wrong to accuse you of Adam's death.

He was a headstrong, wilful boy, and perhaps . . . All the same, It would have been better if you had never come to us. Yes, I wish I had never seen you."

Delie looked up, startled and shocked. In the faded black eyes was the old sparkle of anger.

"I've tried to forgive you; I've prayed; but there it is, I can't. I'm sorry, Delie, but life's been too hard on me. I can't change now. I don't hate you any more, I haven't the strength to love or hate anyone, but in my heart I haven't forgiven you."

"Would you like me to go back to Echuc, then? I only came—"

"No, no, I like to have you here. Charles is hopeless, he seems frightened of the sick-room, he hardly ever comes near me; and to tell you the truth, I don't like that nurse."

"Neither do I . . . Sh-h, here she comes."

The nurse came in with a cup of beef tea and began feeding it to the patient with sippets of bread; but after a few mouthfuls Hester turned her head away.

"I don't want it. I don't want to eat. Nothing has any taste. Delie, go out and get some sunshine. She's looking very pale and peaky, isn't she, Nurse?"

"The sun has set, Mrs. Jamieson."

Delie stepped out through the french windows. There was still enough light for Charles, sitting on the end of the veranda outside the drawing-room, to read his paper. The river gleamed like polished steel between the trees, and gnats danced in little clouds against the pale sky.

"Why don't you go in and see her?" she said in a low voice. "Her mind seems very clear tonight, yet I've a feeling she's very near the end."

"Yes, yes, I must." Charles folded his paper with guilty haste. "But I sometimes think I only annoy her."

"I used to think that about myself, but it seems she likes to see us."

He walked, lean and stooped, along the veranda and entered his wife's room. Delie heard him reading out from the *Riverine Herald* items that he thought might interest her, and her short and dry answers to his queries about how she felt.

Two days later she began to cough. All that day and all night, every thirty seconds, sleeping or waking, she coughed. The next morning, Saturday, Charles set out early in the buggy to fetch the doctor; but soon after he had gone she stopped coughing and lapsed into a coma. Her jaw had fallen, her breath came stertorously and slowly. Every now and then it stopped briefly, as though the breathing mechanism had forgotten its work; then would come a few rapid breaths as though trying to catch up, then another pause. Each time it stopped Delie held her breath too, and waited. . .

Then Hester began to grow restless. Her head turned from side to side on the pillow, her brow puckered, she muttered and moaned. The head turned and turned, as though to escape from something unbearable. In desperation, Delie tried to call her back.

"Auntie, Aunt Hester, what is it? Can you hear me?" she cried, taking her hand.

The head stopped for an instant, the closed lids fluttered, struggled to rise; but only a glimpse of a white, turned-up eyeball was seen. The restless turning began again.

"Oh, God, why doesn't the doctor come?"

"She's only dreaming," said the nurse.

"How do you know?" cried Delie, turning on her fiercely. "How can *you* know what she's suffering?"

Just then the barking of the dogs announced the return of the buggy or the doctor's arrival. Delie ran out the back door and saw with relief the doctor's bulky form descending from his trap. She wanted to kiss his hands, lifting out so carefully the little black bag that contained the magic of peaceful sleep for the weary, of sweet release from pain.

He felt Hester's pulse and at once took a syringe out of the bag and filled it. "Are you awake, Mrs. Jamieson?" he said loudly and clearly. "I am just going to give you something to help you to rest."

Even as they watched, the drug flowed through her veins, and floated her high above the tides of pain and torment. The brow smoothed, the mouth sagged open, the eyelids lay flat in the hollows of the cavernous eye-sockets.

The doctor began his examination, while Delie yet hovered in the door. Suddenly he gave a sharp exclamation, took out a handkerchief and held it to his nose.

"Nurse! She's had a terrific hæmorrhage. I've never . . . Ugh! Will you leave the room, please?" he added sternly to Delie, who had turned deathly white as a foetid stench was wafted towards her. She fled out of doors and down to the river, breathing hard, hard, emptying her lungs of that horror and filling them with the clean, hot scent of dry grass bleaching in the sun.

It was not until she heard the doctor's trap leaving that she came slowly, unwillingly back to the house. As she came in the front door the nurse came out of Hester's room.

"The doctor says, that to all intents and purposes she's already gone. She won't come out of this coma. It's only a matter of time."

"Yes . . . I wonder what has kept my uncle? Is she likely to go at any time?"

"Yes. Yet she may hang on till tomorrow. Though how she can still live after what came away this afternoon—" and she launched with a gloomy relish into details that made Delie turn faint and sick.

She sat down alone in the drawing-room. There was nothing to do but wait and listen. The pauses in the heavy, snoring breaths seemed to lengthen into minutes. She waited, with a kind of sickening excitement: was this the end? But always, with a series of jerks, the breathing began again.

Bella came in with tea on a tray; she drank a cup mechanically, and went across to call the nurse. Her aunt's face was a mask of death, the waxen skin moulded over the skull, the eyes sunken, the jaw helpless; but still the nerves carried on their useless task, the breath rasped in and out. The candles were lit, but still Charles did not come. Delie went outside and wandered about restlessly. She felt an aversion to the nurse's heavy face, a physical oppression in being alone with her.

She had not touched her painting things. She could not detach her mind, fall into the trance of observation where she was merely

an instrument that recorded, in delicate vibrations, the rhythms of nature. She felt out of tune with the whole world, the familiar pattern of the stars was alien and without meaning. She came in again and suggested that the nurse go and rest while she took over. By half-past ten there was no change; the nurse came back, and she crossed to the drawing-room again.

At last, about midnight, when she was dozing in her chair, the nurse came in and announced quietly, "She's gone, Miss Gordon".

"What! Why didn't you call me? Is Mr. Jamieson back yet?"

"No. I called you as soon as I was sure. Do you want me to do the laying out? There's an extra charge for last offices."

"Yes, yes, of course," she cried, feeling a spasm of disgust for the woman's cold efficiency. She went across the passage to her aunt's room, full of guilt and compunction that she had let Hester die alone with that impersonal creature. Yet death must always be a lonely business, even among troops of weeping friends.

Hester looked much the same; her mouth still open, her eyes closed, she seemed to sleep, but more deeply and peacefully than before. After the noisy breaths the room was deathly still. No sound would issue again through those lips which had been so tightly, so bitterly compressed, and now in their helpless sagging showed the complete surrender of the will. 'After life's fitful fever she sleeps well . . . ' thought Delie. This was the healing sleep that would cure all ills, and soothe all suffering.

It was nearly one, and the nurse was just finishing her task, when the sound of roused dogs announced Charles's return. Delie waited till she heard the back door open. Charles came in noisily and went straight to his room at the back. She walked along the passage and tapped at his door.

"All right, m'dear, all right. Bit late, what? How—how's m'wife?" he muttered, opening the door and lurching against it. Delie stared. She had never seen him like this.

"She's dead. An hour ago."

"Dead? She—she's gone? Well—I s'pose I'd better go and see her." He looked guilty and miserable. "There's no hurry;

she'll wait for you," said Delie unkindly, and turned away. She realised now that the failure of this marriage had not been all due to Hester's nature; this, she felt sure, was not the first time Charles had failed her aunt in a crisis.

In the morning, as she went into the still room, she was conscious first that the lamp was out, the lamp which had burned day and night for weeks. The nurse had been making some sort of fumigation in the room, and Charles, to atone for his defection yesterday, had been out and picked an arrful of Christmas lilies from the garden. The room smelt like a church; and the rigid form on the bed seemed no more related to life than a stone image carved upon a tomb.

Outside, an orange butterfly drifted sideways, drunk with summer, and bees hummed drowsily among the petunias which Hester had planted under the side window. The leaves of the river gums moved in the morning breeze with the glint and clash of metal.

A sound of sawing and hammering came from the back, where Charles and Jacky were constructing a coffin of Murray pine. The nurse had intimated that it was as well, in these cases, to get 'the deceased' underground as soon as possible; and the weather was warm.

But Charles showed an unexpected obstinacy when Delie suggested that Hester should be buried in the little plot by the sand-hill where the three unknown children lay. The sunny, sandy enclosure under the Murray pines, in sight of the peaceful river, seemed to her a much more pleasant place to lie for ever than the cemetery in Echuca, already crowded with dead. But Charles said, "No, she wanted to lie beside Adam, and so she shall. We can have her there by this afternoon."

It was already noon when the cart with its long, flat burden, strewn with white jasmine and lilies, set out across the dry river-flats. Bella and the new young lubra, Jessie, who could have had no love for her dead mistress, set up a high-pitched wailing chant as the cart went out through the gates. Delie, with no black

clothes in her wardrobe, was perched incongruously on a box in a frilly white muslin dress, while the nurse, dark and sombre, sat beside Charles in front.

The sun was directly overhead, the heat oppressive, until they entered the shade of the red-gum forest. Here, though the direct rays of the sun were muted, the air was breathless, and from the flowers wilting on the coffin came a strong scent, below which Delie dreaded to discern another scent, and felt sure that she did. An errant blowfly buzzed past, came back, circled, and settled on the side of the cart. She brushed it away fiercely, but it came back. Soon there were two.

By the time they came out in the avenue leading to the bridge, the flies were following like a swarm of bees, and crawling among the flowers. Charles, unconscious, drove on. Delie beat at them with a long-stemmed lily, but they always persistently returned. When they came to the bridge and the Customs officer emerged sleepily from his little enclosure, she was almost hysterical. She nearly shouted at him, "Nothing to declare! Only a dead body. No taxable produce. Nothing but a corpse!"

At the cemetery there was an unexpected check; the sexton was not on duty, and would have to be fetched to dig the grave.

"I'll dig it myself!" cried Charles wildly. He had noticed the flies.

"The grave-digger can be fetched at once," said the caretaker imperturbably. "But you must produce the death certificate before th' burial."

"I haven't it yet, the doctor wasn't there, we've just come in from the country, you understand. He didn't expect her to live above a day or two, but naturally he didn't leave a certificate in advance."

"Then you'd better go and get it from 'im whiles I see about the grave. There's extry charges on a Sunday."

"All right, all right. But if you don't mind we'll leave the coffin here under the trees. For obvious reasons. Nurse, will you come? The doctor may need you as a witness."

At the doctor's there was another delay, for he was out on a call. Delie and the nurse stayed in the waiting room while Charles

went to see the minister.

But Mr. Polson was having a well-earned rest between services, and at first refused to see him, and then told him that he did not bury people on Sunday. When the necessity was explained to him he agreed ungraciously, but said the death certificate must be produced.

Back to the doctor's again; he had just returned. Charles felt better when he had the certificate. He had begun to feel that he was in a nightmare.

As they came out into the glare of the street again, Delie stumbled, unable to see properly. She put out a hand to steady herself on the gate, over which a square glass lamp was suspended in an iron bracket. A loud roaring had begun in her ears, and darkness came crowding in from all sides.

"I think I am going to faint," she said, and did so.

When she came round she was back in the doctor's rooms.

"You've been under a strain, young lady," he said sternly. "And you've had enough for one day. You shouldn't attend the funeral in this heat, and if you have any friends in town where you can stay, I wouldn't advise that long drive back tonight."

"Oh, I—I live here, not out at the farm."

"Good. Then you can go to bed at once."

"I'll take her straight home, doctor," said Charles. "She's had nothing to eat all day, poor child."

"But I'm all right. Of course I must be there." She began to protest, but she swayed on her feet as she stood up.

They left the nurse at her home on the way to the boarding-house. When she had been helped up the stairs, Delie crawled into bed with immense relief. She felt as if she had been beaten all over with sticks, and her inside was hollow.

Yet when the landlady brought her some food on a tray, she could scarcely eat it. She gulped the drink of tea, and picked at the potato salad, but she could not force herself to touch the cold chop. She felt that she would never want to eat meat again. There was a taste of death in her mouth.

CHAPTER EIGHT

In the autumn there came a cheerful note from Kevin Hodge, who seemed to be enjoying the adventure of soldiering half-way round the world:

We started to trek on January 3rd, going as far as Natal, where we met about 200 Boers, who we chased over the border, and had two of our fellows wounded. Poor old Barrett could not stand the rough roads, and died two days later.

We got a mail yesterday, I had your letter and some papers father sent me. It's good to hear from you and to see the old *Riverine Herald* again. I am in a Maxim Gun Corps here, it takes five men to work it and it fires 700 shots a minute. It's a splendid bit of mechanism. . . .

There had been a memorial service in the town for George Barrett when the news came through, and emotional speeches had been made about 'giving his life for the Empire', but there was no false emotionalism in this letter. Death was mentioned casually, as an inevitable part of life and war.

The war news became more alarming; Mafeking was besieged and the defenders were known to be in a desperate plight. When the great news came through on the electric cable, the *Herald* brought out a special poster, **MAFEKING RELIEVED**, and the town went wild. All the church bells and the fire bell were set ringing, people fired off rifles and shotguns, and Delie raced through the boarding-house writing 'Mafeking' on all the mirrors with a piece of soap.

She had been out to the farm only once to see how Charles was getting on. The faithful Bella, still as fat and jolly as ever, was cooking adequate meals; but the house was dirty in the corners, the once spotless kitchen table had taken on a grey shade, and the sand on the kitchen floor needed changing.

When, on the first morning, Delie inadvertently lifted a corner of her breakfast fried egg, she saw that the bottom was a dark viridian green; from which she could deduce the state of the frying-pan.

The young lubra, Jessie, was cheeky and pert. Delie was puzzled at her attitude until, getting up early on the second morning of her stay, she saw the girl slipping out of Charles's room at the back of the house. Jessie was the new unofficial mistress at the farm.

Delie felt hopelessly that her uncle preferred the almost-squalor of his present life; he was too old to change now, and he would never find another white woman to take Hester's place. He had let himself go and his appearance was not prepossessing. When she had arrived there was several days' growth of stubble on his chin, his moustache was unkempt, and his eyes were watery and red-rimmed. Perhaps it was only his wife who had kept a naturally indolent man spry and spruce; or was it a slow process of disintegration which had been going on for years, and which she had only just noticed after an interval?

She went back to Echuca resolved not to visit the farm again. She would always be glad to see Charles, who had once been her only ally in a strange world; but the place was full of painful memories for her.

And since Lije's death, evidences of neglect showed everywhere about the property: broken gates, sagging fences, fowls scratching where the neat vegetable plot had been, and Hester's flower-beds run to seed.

When the first fresh came down the river she welcomed it as a harbinger of the *Philadelphia* and Brenton Edwards; but it was July before she had any news of her. Hailing the *Waradgery* skipper as he was tying up during her lunch-hour, she asked about the former *Jane Eliza*, for the skippers were inclined to ignore her new name.

"The *Jane Eliza* that was? Sure, passed her back there by Dead Horse Point. She's not far behind. My oath, she's got a good boiler. Has to be, with the treatment it gets from that batty engineer. He was hopping mad when we passed her; he'd have

sat on the safety-valve till she blew up, if the skipper'd let 'im. Rotten luck that about poor old Tom."

"Yes . . . I heard. He left me a half-share in her."

"That so? Young Teddy Edwards has took over. He'll be a good river man when he realises that he still has a lot to learn."

"He must have had a good instructor in Captain Tom."

"Too right. But there's some things on'y time'll teach you."

Waiting in the sun and the cold breeze, her ears strained for the steamer's whistle, Delie suddenly became nervous. She noticed the blue paint under her finger-nails, began to wonder what her hair looked like, wished she had worn a fresh blouse this morning. She turned and almost ran back to the studio.

He would be busy berthing, she told herself, and anyway she'd rather meet him here in her own little room than on the public wharf. . . .

She made a pretence of tinting a bride and her beaming maids, but the old familiar sickness, a hollow place bubbling with excitement, was forming in her stomach. She jumped up and smoothed her hair for the third time.

Yet she kept her head down and pretended to be busy when at last she heard his voice in the outer room, asking Mr. Hamilton for permission to come through. When she looked up he filled the doorway.

She got up in a fluster and knocked over a jar of paint. He remained composed, smiling slightly.

"Hullo, Miss Philadelphia. Did you get my letter all right?" He was hatless, and she looked at his crisp golden curls as they shook hands, and thought of the paint and the turpentine.

"Oh, yes, thank you. It was good of you to write and let me know—about poor old Tom, and his generosity to me." The words sounded stilted, but she could not speak naturally. "So we're partners now?"

"That's right. Aren't you coming down to see your namesake? I thought you'd be on the wharf to welcome us."

"Well, we're very busy here, you see—"

"Then I mustn't keep you any longer," he said, turning to go.

"It will be my lunch-hour soon," she said hastily. "I'd love to come down then."

"Good! Then you can come to lunch with me, and show me a decent place to eat. I'm sick of river fare; I'm even tired of Murray cod. Come down to the wharf when you're ready, Miss Philadelphia!"

He was the only one these days who called her by her full name. From him she rather liked it . . . There was nothing she could do about her blouse now, she thought anxiously, putting on the coat of her costume and perching a sailor-hat on her dark hair.

But her glance in the piece of mirror she kept behind the door had reassured her; it showed clear, pale skin and healthy red lips, and blue eyes fringed with dark lashes, looking back under straight brows. She wished her eyebrows had been fine and arched, like Bessie's; but at least they were dark and well-marked.

She scrubbed at the blue paint under her nails in a little bowl of water, and then sat down impatiently to wait for one o'clock.

Brenton Edwards, on the top deck, took off his cap and waved it at her. She went down the wooden steps inside the wharf to the lower levels, and found him waiting on the narrow gang-plank to help her across. The river was still low and under the wharf a bank of slimy mud gave off the damp, nostalgic river-smell.

The grip of his strong hand sent an electric tingle along her wrist, up her arm to her heart and brain, where a momentary panic was set up. But now they were on the deck, he had released her hand, and she was conscious of the half-shy, half-admiring glances of the crew, grouped near the paddle-box under which the galley was built.

One, she noticed, was a Chinaman with a long pigtail. Beside him was a little man in grease-stained dungarees, wearing an ancient cloth cap that was black with grease and engine oil, and under which a pair of fanatical blue eyes glared from beneath shaggy eyebrows.

"The engineer, Charlie McBean," said Brenton. "And this is the mate, Jim Pearce." He indicated a dark, wiry fellow with

humorous grey eyes and a weather-beaten face, brown as an old boot. "He's a Pommy, like yourself——"

"I am not!" flashed Delie.

"An' neither am I," said the mate.

"Anyway, this is your new boss, chaps. Miss Philadelphia Gordon."

There was an embarrassed murmur from the men. A dark-eyed, thin-faced lad was gazing at her with his mouth slightly open.

"Say how d'ye do to the lady, Ben."

"How d'ye do?" said Ben huskily.

"He's the deckhand and cook's offsider. And this is Ah Lee, the cook."

"Vellee pleased, Misse," said Ah Lee, bowing low.

"I'm delighted to meet you all, and—and to see my namesake again, looking so clean and shipshape," she said shyly.

The engineer muttered something into his grey moustache that sounded like 'Jane Eliza' and 'ruddy women', and stumped away to his boiler.

"He's a bit surly at present, probably get drunk tonight," said Brenton in a low voice. "When he's sober he's the best man on the river for getting the last ounce of power out of an engine without it blowing up. But drink's his trouble. He got some rotten plonk at Louth up the Darling, and it was because he wasn't fit to be on duty that Tom was in there and got mixed up with the paddle-shaft. Charlie hasn't forgiven himself for that."

"But shouldn't we get rid of him then, if he's not reliable?"

She had used the 'we' unthinkingly, and could have kicked herself for seeming to want to dictate already. He said rather stiffly, "I've told you he's the best engineer along the river. He doesn't often go on a bender."

"Oh, I see. Of course. Do show me everything again."

After they had been the round of the boat, from the neat little galley to the wheel-house and the tiny saloon, they went off to get some lunch.

"I hope you'll bring her back again, Teddy," shouted Jim Pearce.

Delie was rather taken aback at this casual way of addressing the captain; they all seemed to call him 'Teddy' in the most friendly way. But why not, since they all knew who was boss?

'I really am a Pommy still in some of my ideas,' she thought impatiently.

The luncheon was a great success. Brenton ate with appetite a thick steak and three eggs with chips. She liked to see a healthy man enjoying his food, and for once she made a good lunch herself.

There was something about him so mature and assured, as of a man used to making decisions, that she found herself comparing him, to his advantage, with the boys she had gone out with lately. His sea-blue eyes, sometimes more green than blue, could be both direct and intimate in their glance, or diffused and far-seeing as though looking down a long reach of river.

And there was some subtle, electric attraction between them so that even the casual brushing of their fingers as he took the sugar bowl from her, even the vibration of the tones of his voice, made her acutely aware of him as a man.

"I see you have managed to get all the paint out of your hair," she said demurely, half-way through the meal.

"I was wondering if you remembered our last meeting," he said with an intent look.

But she refused to be embarrassed. "Oh, I haven't forgotten," with a glance at his shining gold curls. She felt again the old compulsion to touch them, to twine them round her fingers.

"And have you kept up your painting?"

"Yes, I'm still studying at the School of Arts, though I feel I've learnt almost all I can here. I should go to Melbourne really, to the National Gallery school. The students here . . . they're not serious about art; there's not enough competition. Does that sound conceited?"

"No. I believe you're good, without seeing your pictures."

"Most people here prefer Hamilton's tinted postcards."

"You tint them very well."

"I tint them horribly, because I'm paid to." For the first time

she felt a little out of tune with him. "I wish my pictures would sell half as well. The pleasure of spending money is one of the minor, but more perfect pleasures of life."

"I don't know. I suppose, for a woman it is. Money doesn't mean much to me except in a negative way—as a—well, as a sort of sheet-anchor against want, and to save you from having to do a job you don't like."

"You like the river, don't you?"

"Love it! But I don't want a lot of *things*."

"Neither do I! I hadn't realised it before, but you made me see it. Of course I like pretty clothes, and new hats and smart shoes. But 'things', like a little home with roses round the door, and fandiddles on the mantelpiece, and vases to get broken—they just clutter you up."

He gave his great shout of laughter, and a waitress at the end of the room jumped and stared. "It's just as well some people like things, anyway, or they wouldn't buy your pictures."

She laughed. "True. And I suppose a paddle-steamer is only a very large 'thing'."

"Ah, but a moving thing. They don't get cluttered up like houses. And then there are things *and* things; for instance, I like buying books."

"So do I. And prints too, for that matter."

"So you see we're just a pair of bower-birds after all; collectors of junk."

"Oh, I do envy you your life on the river, waking in a new place every morning. Sometimes I feel stifled in Echuca. I suppose I'd be lonely in the city; yet I feel like going off to Melbourne, and even if I starved——"

"Don't fool yourself with romantic dreams of the city. That sort of existence, starving in a garret and so on, is all right to look back on. You kind of forget the worry about where the next meal is coming from, the poor food, the cold and the misery, afterwards. But at the time it's no fun, except in romantic books. You'd soon wish yourself back again."

She looked at him speculatively. "You sound as if you knew something about it."

"I do. I ran away from home when I was little more than a kid, because I couldn't get on with my old man. I lost my mother when I was only twelve——"

"Why, so did I!" They stared at each other, struck by the coincidence. "And you came to Melbourne?"

"Yeah, I tramped about looking for work, taking odd jobs, and nearly always hungry. But I was too stubborn to go home, crawling back to my old man. There was never enough money for things like new boots, and I couldn't get a steady job. I was really on me uppers when I saw an advertisement for a deck-hand on a river-boat. By the time my grandfather died and left me my bit of money, I didn't want to leave the river. It sort of gets into your blood."

"Yes, I know, but Echuca is so far from anywhere. It's neither Sydney nor the Bush. No one will ever hear of my work in this backwater, and I can't study properly here."

"Then you'd better save up for a year in Melbourne. We made just over a hundred pounds clear on the trip, in spite of missing the river with that hold-up in Bourke. There's fifty pounds to begin with; you could do it on that . . . Damn it! I meant to discuss business with you from the beginning, and you put it out of mind."

He was looking at her so intently, as though memorising every detail of her face or trying to read some answer there to a question not yet asked, that she dropped her eyes in confusion.

"It's too late now," she said. "I must fly."

"Then you'll just have to come to lunch with me again. Or what about coming to tea on board? Ah Lee is off duty tonight, but I'm quite a good cook—you'd be surprised."

She hesitated for a second, wanting to ask if the mate would be on board; but she felt sure he would not have asked her otherwise. "Yes, I think it will be all right. You're almost certainly a better cook than I am."

He touched her elbow lightly as he led her out in to the street. "I'd like to see the final result of that painting—the one I so rudely interrupted. Will you bring it along, or have you sold it?"

"No. I was going to present it to Tom. Now you can have it,

to hang in your—er—state-room.”

“In my saloon.” †

As she hurried back to the studio Delie kept frowning and then smiling, shaking and tossing her head, as though carrying on a conversation with someone.

‘He’s far too sure of himself,’ she was saying inwardly, ‘and yet at times he can be endearingly small-boyish. But really, when you look at him, his eyes are too small and his mouth too hard. Yet there’s no doubt about his charm . . .

‘And to think I may have enough to go to Melbourne soon, and see the Art Gallery, and perhaps study there for a whole year!’

She gave a skip in the air at the thought.

Just ahead of her an old woman, dressed in rusty black, with a humped back and hopelessly shaking hands and head, was shuffling along, her eyes on the ground. Delie looked at her in pity and horror.

‘If I can’t skip when I’m seventy,’ she resolved, ‘I mean to die.

CHAPTER NINE

The winter dusk settled down on the river. Wisps of steam curled up from its surface, and away behind the western trees an orange glow lingered between smoky clouds. After the noise and bustle of the day there was now quiet, though occasional shouts from boat to boat, a laugh or a sudden oath drifted over the water, to startle the wild duck and water-hens in the reeds.

Delie had put on her cherry-coloured costume and the little hat from which she had torn the ribbons to mend the sulky reins. It was now trimmed with two wide grey feathers that swept back on each side of her brow, giving her a swift, forward-moving look, like a bust of Mercury or a figurehead on a ship.

Down to the wharf she hurried, the cold air putting a delicate glow in her cheeks. She was filled with a pleasurable excitement. She was going to tea on board a boat, probably unchaperoned, with a man she scarcely knew.

He was leaning with lazy grace on the end of the paddle-box, his hands in his pockets, his golden curls uncovered, looking musingly down at the water. When he heard Delie's step on the hollow wooden wharf he looked up, bounded across the gang-plank, and came up the stairs to meet her.

"Does he really think I might fall in, or is it just an excuse to hold my hand?" thought Delie as he led her carefully aboard, and along to the galley next to the paddle-box.

"Now sit on that stool and don't interrupt," he said. "I like to concentrate when I'm cooking. But first, a snack in case you get too hungry watching me."

He handed her a plate of dainty savouries made with several kinds of tinned fish. "*Smörgåsbord*—I learnt that from a Norwegian captain. Omelettes I shall now make as my grandmother used to make them."

"You *are* clever," she said admiringly, crunching a crisp cheese biscuit and looking at the mixing bowls, eggs, and bags of flour neatly arranged on the bench by the wood stove. "I'm hopeless in a kitchen."

"Then pipe down and watch." He beat the eggs vigorously, carefully measured out milk and water, and poured the mixture into a pan of sizzling butter.

"Onions!" cried Delie, as he scooped up a pile of onion shreds. "Whoever heard of onions in an omelette?"

"Quiet! Who's cooking this meal?"

He put on another pan with dripping, deftly rolled the omelette and divided it on to two warmed plates, then lifted a round cake of dough and slid it into the fat. "Fried damper—you'll like it. Now grab your plate and come on."

Delie was by now enjoying his unceremoniousness, which had put her at her ease at once. She did not even notice that the mate was nowhere to be seen, until they were seated at a table fixed under an awning on the deck.

"I should have taken you up to the saloon, but it's stuffy, rather."

"Isn't the mate on board for tea?"

"Oh, he's got a girl-friend in the town; practically engaged to

her. He's staying with her people tonight. Ben's at his married sister's place. Ah Lee has gone to some opium joint, no doubt, and poor old Charlie's on a bender . . . Christ! I forgot!"

"What?"

"I used the last onion for the omelette!"

"It's the nicest omelette I've ever tasted. What about the onion?"

"Charlie will be looking for one to help him recover in the morning."

"An onion?"

"Yes, he won't eat anything but raw onion sandwiches the morning after. Says it's a sure cure for a hangover. The mixture of stale whisky and fresh onion is a bit overpowering if you get to windward——"

"Help!" she giggled. "And with Ah Lee reeking of opium, and Jim Pearce of his girl's scent, you'll have an interesting atmosphere on board tomorrow. And Ben—no, somehow I can only think of Ben smelling of books. He's a clever-looking lad. He ought to be at school."

"Yes. Ben's a bright lad but he hasn't had a chance. Farmed out as a kid—family couldn't afford to keep him—half-starved on a cocky's run where he had to get up at dawn to milk the cows and didn't finish separating till eight or nine at night . . . He was half-stupid with weariness when he came to us. There are some farmers, you know, who drive themselves and their families into an early grave; just go on grafting like bullocks for a bare living until they drop."

"Of course, ours was a fairly big farm, and well-run in those days, with irrigation from the river. And not many cows."

She found herself telling him about their arrival at the farm, their long trek from the mountains up near the source of the Murray, about Adam and how they used to go ski-ing over the snowy slopes about Kiandra, and, later, boating and fishing on the river.

"We used to watch the steamers go past, and you've no idea how wonderfully exciting they seemed at night, with those great reflectors lighting up the trees and the trail of sparks from the

smoke-stack. I always wanted to go on one right down the river to the sea. Tell me about the river, Mr. Edwards!"

"I only know the top end, as far as Wentworth," he said. He began to tell her about long nights at the wheel, black nights when you had to steer by instinct, and every shadow looked like a sandbank.

"When I first came up the river I was only a lad, you know; but I'd had some experience steering a steam-launch that ran trips from Williamstown on the Bay. I had a job on her for a while. The first river-steamer I was ever on, the mate said to me the second evening, 'Can you steer?' I'd just brought him up a cup of tea to the wheel-house. 'Yes,' I said like a fool. 'Well, take the wheel for a while, son. I want to go below and have a drink.'

"Well, I took over, feeling mighty pleased and proud, and looking back all the time to see how straight a wake I was leaving. But it got darker and darker and the mate didn't come back; there wasn't a soul on deck I could call out to. There was no speaking-tube to the engine or anything like that. I shouted, but no one heard, or anyway they didn't take any notice.

"For more than two hours I steered that ruddy boat along reaches I'd never seen before, not knowing where the channel was, and cursing that mate for all I was worth. At last we fetched up with a horrible jar on a sandbank.

"The skipper came out from his cabin and roared me head off. The mate had gone below and got on the plonk, leaving me to steer until someone happened along to relieve me. The skipper gave me a steering lesson after that; he was a good-hearted old bloke really; but the mate got the sack after that trip."

"And did you get off the sandbank?"

"Oh yes, we winched her off finally. There's no waiting for the tide to lift you off in the Murray; you get off by your own efforts, or roost on the mud for perhaps six months waiting for the next rise. There was a steamer once took nearly three years to get up the Darling to Bourke."

"Is the Darling worse than the Murray to navigate?"

"When it's a good river it's good, the channel is fairly straight-

forward, while in the Murray it's shifting all the time. But in a drought the Darling's just a chain of water-holes in the bottom of a muddy ditch."

"I'd like to go up to Bourke. Oh, there are so many places I want to go. There's so much I want to do!"

She stared out over the darkening water. A moth came flying from the darkness against the lamp, fell down on the cloth and crawled painfully in circles. "I'll probably singe my wings, but that's no reason for not flying; or at least making the attempt."

He put out a big finger and crushed the moth deliberately. "You mean Melbourne?"

"Yes, I'm beginning to feel I must get away. Mr. Wise, my art teacher, advises me to go the Gallery School there." She averted her eyes from the smudge on the cloth.

"That reminds me—the picture."

"Oh! It's in the galley."

He brought it and stood it where the lamplight fell on it. "Jolly good—the highlights on the water, and that dappled shade on the awning—it's got the very breath of summer in it."

"Do you think so?" The shyness she felt when anyone looked at her work was doubled as she thought of the circumstances in which he had last seen it. Did she want him to kiss her again like that, did she? The tingling of her veins told her that she did. He showed that he was thinking of the same thing.

"Yes; and considering the interruptions, you suffered . . ." There was discreet laughter in his eyes. She looked down, trying not to smile, conscious of rising colour.

"This calls for a celebration," he cried, jumping up. He hauled on a rope at the side, until a dripping sack came up with a clank of bottles. He took out the two bottles of beer, gleaming brown in the lamplight. The sack lay on the floor, oozing a black puddle of water.

"To the success of Miss Philadelphia Gordon! May she dazzle the Melbourne critics——"

"Delphine is the name I paint under," she said shyly, sipping

her beer. It was very bitter, and she swallowed it quickly like medicine.

"Delphine? No, I like Philadelphia; I've got used to it, seeing it on the front of the wheel-house all the time. And you call me Teddy, will you? This 'Mr. Edwards' business sounds so stiff."

"Well . . . I prefer Brenton, really."

"Good. No one but my mother ever called me that, and you remind me of her. She had a fine skin like yours, fine and pale, like ivory with a tinge of life in it." He was staring at her so hard that she blushed, a rosy wave mantling up from throat to forehead in her clear skin.

"Finish your beer and you can come and show me where to hang it," he said, producing wire, nails, and screws from his pocket. "More damper and jam first?"

"No thank you! I feel as if I should sink like a stone if I fell overboard."

"Good God! Was it as heavy as all that?"

"No, but I've had so much. Now I must help you wash up."

"Nonsense, Ah Lee will do that tomorrow."

"Oh, but that's not fair." She stood up and began gathering their plates. She was not used to beer, and it had gone straight to her knees. One of the plates fell with a crash.

She began to apologise for the breakage, but he pointed out that the plate was half hers anyway, and persuaded her to leave the rest. He handed her the lantern and preceded her up the narrow steps over the paddle-box to the little panelled saloon beside the two cabins. He tried the picture on the limited wall-space.

"I think here is almost the only place."

"Yes. That should be a good light, by day. Not too high—about eye-level."

He tapped in a nail and adjusted the picture carefully, stepping back almost out of the door to get the effect.

"It really looks quite good," said Delie, flashing the lantern.

"Here, be careful with that."

Catching her hand in both of his, he held it while he took the lantern from her and set it carefully on the floor, so that their faces were in shadow. She could see only the gleam of his eyes as he stood over her, looking at her strangely. Her heart beat suffocatingly, but she could no more move than a bird fascinated by the eyes of a snake. In a moment she was no more, lost, devoured, drawn up by his mouth to somewhere above the earth.

At last with an effort she struggled back to consciousness, but his lips would not set her free. In desperation she twined her fingers in his thick curls and dragged his head away.

"Why did you do that?" His voice was pained, his eyes looked dazed.

"I—I couldn't breathe."

"Oh, darling! I'm sorry. I wish——" He rested his cheek on her hair, rocking her gently in his arms. His fingers traced the whorl of her ear, delicately explored the curve of her eyebrow and cheek, the outline of her quivering lips, travelled down her warm throat where a pulse was throbbing under the high collar. He followed her whole shape as if he would remember it for ever.

This was worse than his destroying kisses. She leant against him, mindless and relaxed. Nothing mattered; the rest of the world did not exist.

"Would you——?"

His voice came huskily, he cleared his throat and began again more strongly. "Would you like to go for a row on the river?"

Like a drowning man hit on the head with a lifebelt, she started, and grasped at the solid, unexpected words.

"Yes. Oh yes. I should like that very much."

The world was flowing back. They were still standing, as an eternity ago, with the lantern at their feet.

He bent and lifted the lantern, and they moved out under the sky. Great cold stars were glowing brightly in the darkness, reflected in trembling points of light from the river. Warm lights from other boats farther upstream fell softly on the water.

In silence they made their way to the bottom deck, where he pulled the dinghy up to the stern. A burst of laughter came from

one of the boats, and then, drifting unexpectedly over the water, a baby's wail.

"I can row, you know," said Delie, settling in the dinghy.

"I'll row, thanks," he said rather shortly. Bending to the oars, he sent the boat leaping forward with a sudden sweep. She trailed her fingers over the stern, feeling the water, as she had expected, warmer than the night air.

"Are you warm enough?" He was turning to look over his shoulder for direction, and flung the words back at her without a glance.

"Quite, thank you. It's a lovely night."

She looked up at the slanting band of the Milky Way, and the great dark Emu that Minna had shown her, stalking over the plains of the skyland of Byamee; and the sharp bright notches of the Southern Cross by which many a Dreamtime hero had climbed up there from earth.

Beneath the boat, under the reflected stars, the Bunyip lurked, and the water-people who would take children down to underwater caves from which they would never return.

"We'll go and call on George Blakeney, of the *Providence*," said Brenton. "His wife's just had a baby, and he's like a dog with two tails over it. She lives on board, and travels up and down-river with him . . . Ahoy there!" He brought the dinghy round with a few expert sweeps of one oar to the stern of the steamer, where gay curtains hung in the lighted windows of the little saloon, and the ledges were bright with geraniums growing in boxes.

"Who's there?" cried a dark, nuggety man with a pipe between his teeth, his brown arms showing against his rolled-up shirt-sleeves.

"Edwards, of the *Philadelphia*."

"Ah, Teddy me boy! Come aboard, come aboard! Have ye come for another look at me wonderful nipper?"

"I've seen it, thanks."

"It! It! Listen to the man, Mabel, he's callin' our beautiful daughter an 'it'. Well, and who's this lovely young lady?"

"Miss Philadelphia Gordon, the new owner."

"Part-owner, you know," said Delie shyly.

"How do ye do, and welcome aboard the *Providence*, Miss Philadelphia. Now there's a fine, sounding name for a girl and a steamer. I wanted to call the baby after a steamer, but when it was a girl the Missus wouldn't hear of it, till I remembered there was a *Marion* down the bottom end."

"I should just think not," said a plump, pretty woman with merry black eyes, coming forward into the lantern light. "Mary Anne is all right, though. Won't you come into the saloon, Miss Gordon? I'm sure it's that untidy, but with a young baby and all, you know how it is . . ."

Delie didn't at all know, but she agreed enthusiastically.

In a corner of the saloon was a dark wooden crib, in which the baby played with its own fingers, with sudden, unco-ordinated movements and misdirected grabs. It was making a quiet bubbling sound of pleasure.

"Would you like to hold her?" said the proud mother, as if this were the highest honour she could offer the visitor.

"Well——" said Delie, embarrassed. She knew nothing about babies and was terrified she would drop it. But "Here's the little love", said the mother, and a warm, solid bundle was put into her arms.

"Isn't she beautiful!" said Delie, feeling foolish.

The baby looked up at the strange face with wonder—not curiosity, but simple wonder, its eyes stretched as round as they would go. A clean, sweetish, milky smell came from it. Suddenly it put both fists to its mouth and smiled, doubling up its knees. Delie looked down, with a reciprocal wonder, at the pink, crumpled hands, the perfect little feet with their nails like tiny shells. The mother, with a gentle, possessive movement, took the baby back, but as she moved with it the baby's head turned, the round eyes kept watching in complete absorption the strange face.

"She's starting to take notice of everything. Her father thinks she's that cute——"

"And so she is," cried George Blakeney, coming in followed by Brenton, who had to bend his head to get under the low door.

Brenton went up and gave the baby a big finger to hold, looking down at it with a half-amused expression.

"She's the best baby between here and Wentworth, eh, Teddy?" said George.

"Yes, you haven't been up with her night after night, crying, like I have," said his wife darkly, perhaps feeling that she should temper this extravagant praise a little.

"Now, what will you have to wet the baby's head?" said George.

"We won't stop for anything, thanks, old chap. I'm just showing Miss Gordon some of the rival steamers, and then she has to get back."

He looked down at her compellingly, his sea-blue eyes very bright, and for the moment it seemed that she was alone with him; there was no one else in the world. She made her good-byes mechanically. •

They waved good-bye from the dinghy, and rowed on up the line of steamers, some black and deserted, others glowing with lights. The sound of singing came from one, and the wheezing wail of a concertina; from another a clatter of tin plates being washed up. A bucket of refuse was thrown overboard with a splash.

'And yet the river is so clean!' thought Delie, 'for all the pollutions of life that it receives; for it is always refreshed, always renewed, from the pure snow-mountains at its source. Though it rises in the mountains and flows to the sea, it has no beginning and no end, because it is for ever.' She looked at the few soft clouds moving majestically across the stars from the south-west, and thought vaguely of the circle of water: the river flowing down to the sea, the clouds arising and drifting back over the land, to fall as snow or rain, and flow down once more to the sea. Some lines that Adam loved to quote came into her head:

When I behold upon the night's starred face
Huge cloudy symbols of an old romance . . .

For the first time in many months tears rose to her eyes for

Adam. Oh, what was the matter with her? She had been so happy, so unthinking, tonight. As she looked at them the stars blurred and flashed out points of light. Oh splendid stars, oh jewelled Cross! Their splendour and indifference seemed to pierce her through.

The dinghy swung round, the sky whirled slowly about her head. They were dropping down with the current, the oars slipping effortlessly in and out of the water, silently but for the click of the rowlocks.

As they came opposite the *Philadelphia*, Brenton rowed to the centre of the river, shipped the oars and came back beside her, letting the boat drift. He wrapped his arms about her and put his cheek against hers.

"What's this? Tears?" He pretended to start back in surprise. "Don't you think there's enough water in the Murray already?"

She smiled wanly. His solid figure and strong arms were infinitely comforting.

"You're a strange creature." He drew her back over his knees and they stared into each other's dim faces, while the boat drifted silently on. He played with her hair until a long strand came loose. He wound it about her throat with a mock-threatening gesture; she closed her teeth gently upon his hand. Then he was kissing her, endlessly, until the dinghy went quietly aground on the bend below the Campaspe junction.

They rowed back to the steamer in silence, and all the time he looked at her. When he took her hand and helped her clamber over the rudder to the deck, he cried: "Your hands are frozen! I must get you a hot drink."

"No, I don't want anything. I'll just get my hat—it's under the awning, I think."

"I'll get it."

She was twisting ineffectually at her soft hair, which was tumbling loose from its pins, when he came back with the hat. The lantern was burning in the stern, and she was outlined against it in an attitude of grace; he saw her small waist, her rounded bosom, the long, graceful flow of her skirt.

As they went to the side, he stooped suddenly and did something to the gangplank. Then he stood up, pulled it inboard, and flung it down on the deck with a crash.

"Now we are on an island, entirely surrounded by water," he said, and lifted her in his arms.

CHAPTER TEN

Mr. Hamilton looked suspiciously at Delie as she came into the studio with a blithe 'good morning'. Taking off her hat before the little mirror, she stared at her face to see if it looked different, wiser and more mature. Last night she had had the strangest feeling of being possessed by the elemental force of life, ruthless, impersonal, and inescapable; as if their human bodies were only the instruments of some blind power. Surely she must be changed . . .

"What's the matter with you this morning?" grumbled Mr. Hamilton. "You're looking very smug about something."

'I'm in love!' she almost said. 'I love, I have loved, I have been loved, I shall love——' She controlled herself and managed to say, "Oh, I don't know, it's such a lovely morning."

"Is it? I thought it was a bit cold."

"Oh no! It's a wonderful morning."

He pushed the sofa in front of the Italian balustrade. "We've got Miss Griggs booked for this morning, you know. Here, will you arrange these flowers? I want to make a good job of this, she can bring us a lot of custom."

Bessie coming this morning! Delie remembered with wonder how she used to be jealous of Bessie, when Adam first came to live in the town. Bessie Griggs, daughter of the town's wealthiest draper, with her charming features, easy manners, and unlimited means for dressing; popular with the girls, sought after by the boys, patronising to herself. This morning she suddenly felt impervious to Bessie.

She worked quietly, while physical memories of Brenton stirred

her blood and every now and then made her heart turn over in her breast. She was dreaming of him when the door opened and Bessie came into the studio. She was dressed in a smart costume trimmed with fur, and a little hat on which was mounted a whole bird, its wings sweeping back on each side of her fair brow. Her golden hair was drawn back smoothly, her lips and cheeks were as fresh and rosy as when she had been a schoolgirl.

Behind her came a tall, languid girl with dark hair and long dark eyes, dressed with a careless elegance that spoke of Melbourne. Delie wanted to stare, but pretended to be busy with the engagement book.

"Hullo, Delie, do you have to be here as early as this every morning?" cried Bessie gaily. "We could only just drag ourselves out of bed in time. Delie works for her living, Nesta. Isn't she quaint?" Her perfect little teeth showed as she laughed; her eyes were as flat as blue china.

The tall girl did not reply to the words or the laugh, but looked at Delie attentively.

"My name's Nesta Motteram, since Bessie has forgotten to introduce us." Her voice was warm and deep, as Delie had expected.

"How do you do? I'm Philadelphia Gordon."

"What an unusual name! Were you called after the place, or a ship, or what?"

"The place, actually. My father always wanted to go there. But there is a ship named after me."

"A ship! A little old paddle-steamer," jeered Bessie, annoyed at being left out of the conversation.

"But what fun! I love paddle-steamers. Could I see it?"

"She's in port at present, if you'd like to come down to the wharf with me at lunch-time," said Delie, wondering at her own impulse.

"I was going to ask you to have lunch with us anyway," said Bessie. She left them rather huffily, to take up her pose on the sofa, seeming to resent the instant attraction between her two friends. But she smiled brilliantly at Mr. Hamilton and the camera.

"Come and see my work-room." Delie looked under her lashes at the girl's neat figure in its brown-and-white shepherd's plaid, trimmed with brown velvet, and the velvet toque that matched exactly the long, Egyptian brown eyes. The stranger fascinated her. She ushered her into the small back room. Nesta moved as if bored and tired, but her luminous dark eyes were quick and observant.

"What's this?" she said at once, picking up Delie's oil-painting of Echuca from the back of the table. "Is this your work?"

"Yes. Painting's my real job. This other is my bread-and-butter."

"Mm." A deep note of approval. Delie flushed happily.

"I hope to get to Melbourne to study soon."

"You should. I hope I'll still be there."

"Don't you belong there?"

"Yes, but I'm going abroad, the end of August."

"Oh-oh! France, Italy . . . Florence . . . The Louvre; the Uffizi, the Pitti palace——"

"I hope to write a travel book. I love writing, but I haven't the—the inventive faculty, I'm not a tale-spinner." She sat on the edge of the table, her eyes fixed on a slowly turning windmill beyond the window. "D'you know the trouble with me? Too much money."

The confession was made so naturally, so humorously, it could not be taken for boasting. Delie looked astonished.

"Too much money! Impossible."

"It's true. It takes so much willpower to give up comfort. I know if I travelled steerage and second-class, I'd see more and meet more interesting people. Stevenson walked about France with a donkey, and see what a book he made of it! But there it is—I like comfort, and then being a girl is a snag."

"Yes, isn't it?" They looked at each other and laughed.

"What are you two gossiping about in here?" cried Bessie brightly, sailing in with one hand to her hair, her neck turning in the old coquettish, swanlike movement.

"Oh—shoes, and ships, and sealing-wax," said Nesta.

"Sealing-wax!" Bessie seized on the last word. "I saw a

divine violet colour in the stationer's the other day, so much more attractive than that common old red."

"I'd like to paint you like that!" said Delie suddenly. She had been studying Nesta's carelessly graceful attitude as she sat on the edge of the table, one long hand lying palm upward in her lap, her dark eyes fixed on something far beyond the window, somewhere in the future.

Nesta turned her deep gaze upon her. "Do you paint portraits as well?"

"Yes, but don't let Mr. Hamilton hear! He doesn't like opposition from painters. I've only tried a couple of self-portraits actually, apart from exercises in class with other students for models. Oh, if only I had my things here!" She was searching feverishly for a pencil, feeling that she must catch that pose before Nesta moved.

"You've never offered to paint my portrait, Delie."

"Oh, only the camera could do you justice, my dear Bessie. You're too perfect." Her blue eyes were sparkling with joy and excitement. "Will you sit for me, Nesta?"

Nesta stood up, and smoothed down her skirt. "Why yes, I'll commission a portrait if you like."

Delie stared at her, while the quick colour mounted her throat, flowed in a wave to the very edges of her hair. The lazy insolence of the tone stung her, more than the words. "I don't want your money," she said contemptuously. "I'm only interested in your face. If I weren't, no amount would induce me to waste my time over you."

"I'm sorry." Nesta put out her hand with the swiftest movement she had yet made. "That's what I mean about having too much money. It makes you suspicious of people's motives, even people of such obvious integrity as yourself."

"Thank you!"

"No, but really! Say you forgive me. Please do my portrait."

"Of course. When can you sit for me?"

"Couldn't you come round to our place to do it? Nesta's staying with me for a fortnight."

"I'd have to come at night for the first sketches. Only you

mustn't talk to her while she's posing, Bessie. I want to get that faraway look in the eyes."

"Oh, all right. But do come on, Nesta. We've got all that shopping to do." Bessie was becoming bored by a conversation in which neither men nor clothes were mentioned.

"What a perfectly sweet little steamer!" Nesta was standing on the wharf gazing down at the *Philadelphia*, neat with fresh white paint. The current slipped past her bows with a ripple of brown water, giving the illusion that she was moving upstream.

Smoke was coming from the galley chimney. The figure of Ah Lee, in blue trousers and white jacket, could be seen moving to and from the awning. Ben came to the side and dipped up a bucket of water. Brenton appeared from his cabin door and waved to them, cap in hand, the sun gleaming on his hair.

Delie wondered if the others could hear her heart thumping, as they made their way down the dark stairs to the lower wharf. Brenton was waiting to help them aboard. "Oh, thank you," said Bessie archly as he took her hand. "I was *simply* ter-rified coming down."

Nesta came next, and Delie, watching with eyes made aware by love, saw the long look she exchanged with Brenton. 'He's attracted by her,' she thought with a pang. The attraction of opposites, the dark and the fair, brown eyes and blue. How could he look at anyone else this morning! Then her hand was taken in his firm grip, and she forgot everything but the warm current of feeling that flowed from his touch.

"Oh, Captain Edwards, could we see all the little wheels that go round, and everything? This is my friend, Miss Nesta Motteram, from Melbourne, and she's most terribly interested in paddle-steamers."

"Well, it's not like a watch mechanism, Miss Griggs. There's nothing much to a steam-engine; just a boiler the same as on a locomotive, but instead of driving land wheels, it drives paddle-wheels . . . Mind, step over carefully, that's greasy. This is the shaft that turns the wheels——"

They went on through the narrow space beside the boiler, and

Brenton suddenly pulled Delie back and kissed her fiercely. "Darling, I'll call for you at about eight tonight."

"Yes . . ." she gasped.

They went on behind Nesta with her indolent walk and alive, interested eyes, and Bessie with her blank eyes and excited chatter.

"This is where the boiler is stoked." Brenton opened the fire-box door and pointed to the stacks of red-gun in four-foot lengths that made a wall behind the end of the boiler. "That thing's the pressure gauge; if it shows over seventy-five pounds the boiler may blow up, so the safety valve is set to blow off at that pressure. But Charlie, the engineer, keeps her at about eighty; if she tries to blow off before that he puts a weight on the valve."

"But isn't it dangerous?"

"Not very. Sometimes a boiler blows up and kills somebody, like the fireman and engineer of the old *Lady Augusta*. But all the best engineers sprag the gauges. You have to keep up your speed these days, with railways taking so much of the trade. It's a race to get what cargo is offering."

A sound of raucous singing came from the port side, and there appeared the wild figure of Charlie McBean, his cap rakishly over one ear, wavering on the edge of the wharf.

"Oh, he'll fall in!" shrieked Bessie.

"He'll be all right," said Brenton calmly. "He gets like this now and then."

Charlie suddenly flopped on all fours and crawled along the gangplank, singing as he came. Arrived on deck, he pitched flat on his face, muttering "Lee! Ah Lee! Bring me fresh onion shangwich. Full o' vital ju-juices. Nothin' like a nonion for little—little indigeschun."

Brenton went over to the prostrate form. "All right, Charlie, I'll help you up to bed. We'll get some onions for you soon. There's none on board at present."

"No *onions*! All I ask—just one li'l onion—man's last request—"

"All right, Charlie. Come on now." Lifting him easily and carrying him, Brenton took him up the steps, and disappeared into the engineer's cabin.

"I must go if I'm to have time for any lunch," said Delie, sharply reminded of how she had been carried up those same steps in those strong arms.

"Certainly, let us go," said Bessie with an expression of disgust on her face, drawing her skirts closely round her. But Nesta looked amusedly up at Charlie's cabin, from which came muffled blasphemies.

"I like your captain, Delie. I wouldn't mind owning a steamer."

'I can see you do,' thought Delie, feeling vaguely resentful. 'Yes, it's easy for you; you can indulge your whims, from buying steamers to trips round the world; you could study art with the greatest living masters, you could buy all the paints and canvases you wanted . . .'

Brenton's interested look as he said good-bye to Nesta did not improve her temper. The luncheon was not a success. Delie had quite lost confidence in herself, and sat uneasily between her two well-dressed companions, feeling dowdy and poverty-stricken in her serge skirt and blouse.

Bessie, who had never been a tactful person, completed her discomfiture by exclaiming suddenly, in a profoundly shocked tone, "Delie! Your nails are dirty!"

It was true; there was some of that wretched Antwerp blue beneath her nails, and in her impatient and excited state before lunch she had not scrubbed it out properly. She blushed and put her hands beneath the table. What would Nesta think of her? And had Brenton been comparing her with this beautiful, well-groomed girl from the city? She finished her lunch hastily, without tasting it.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Brenton, lying on a couch of scratchy but aromatic scrub, gazed up into the formless, clouded sky. It was unexpectedly warm for a winter night, which was just as well, for they were wrapped in nothing but his coat.

"I feel so peaceful, don't you?" he said.

Delie propped herself on one elbow and played with his hair. "Yes. I'm very happy."

It was true; she was happy that she had given him pleasure, that she had managed not to cry out, that he had no inkling of how much he had hurt her. But she'd had to bite her lip hard to keep back the tears, and tell herself that she must bear it, while he breathed endearments into her mouth. And since extreme suffering and extreme pleasure are perhaps only different forms of the same thing, they had really had some sort of consummation together.

"It must be very late," she said, as the clouds parted low down in the east and showed a few bright stars swimming in a black sky. The once-strange Southern constellations had now become as familiar as the face of friends; their endless progression across the sky was like the flow of water, the visible flow of time.

"I don't care how late it is." As he spoke the Town Hall clock in Echuca chimed the hour of twelve. But he only laughed, and reaching upward kissed her small, firm breasts as she hung above him, while she sighed with pleasure.

"Oh, but I must go. My landlady . . . What if the door is locked?"

"That will be a good thing. Then you'll have to stay with me all night."

"But I have to go to work tomorrow. Please, darling. Let me go."

"All right, go. I'm not stopping you," he said, holding her tightly, while desire flooded through his veins again like a returning tide.

But she was too wise to struggle. She became limp and pathetic. "I'm so terribly tired."

"Of course. I'm a selfish brute." Reluctantly they drew apart, feeling the cold strike between them. A damp exhalation came from the river slipping quietly past the bank where they had lain. Its surface glimmered faintly.

"What about tomorrow night?" he asked as they neared the boarding-house.

"I'll be busy, I'm afraid. I'm starting work on a portrait of Nesta Motteram."

"That dark girl?"

"Yes, she's only here for a couple of weeks, and——"

"Well, I won't be here much longer."

"No, but I've promised. And she has such an interesting face."

"All right. Saturday, then."

"Saturday night. I'll be painting all the afternoon."

As they stood alone in the long, deserted street outside the door, he surprised her by suddenly putting his head down on her shoulder, hiding his face like a guilty child.

"I'm sorry, Delie!" he said in a muffled voice.

"Sorry! What for? I'm not, so why should you be?"

"You're so young! How old are you?"

"Just twenty."

"Twenty! And I'm twenty-eight. And I can't get married just yet."

"But I keep telling you I don't *want* to get married."

"I'm afraid you might have a child."

"I'd love to have your child. He'd be a boy, and perfectly beautiful. But it's all right, I did everything you told me."

"Yes, it'll be all right. But still . . ."

"Why can't I have your baby because I love you? I don't see why there have to be legal complications. Our social system's all wrong."

"It's better than most."

"It's all wrong. Unmarried mothers——"

"It's a matter of economics. Women can't support children by working, and bring them up as well. And there are so few jobs for women."

"They could do anything a man can do, if they had the chance."

"Anything but one thing," he said, and laughed.

"Pass the beetroot to Delie, dear."

Mrs. Griggs presided over the table in sleepy majesty, her eyes, of the same china-blue as Bessie's, perpetually half-closed as if

the effort of seeing beyond her vast bosom was too much for her. Delie had come for the evening meal, her sketching things under her arm. She was burning to begin.

Mr. Griggs passed the beetroot, and looked carefully about the table to see what might be missing. He was a small, fussy, grey-haired man with alert, sharp features. He liked to hold up a meal while he sent the knives away to be sharpened, or demanded some extra from the kitchen.

Though for years Mrs. Griggs had been gradually increasing the variety of sauces, chutneys and jams on the table, he kept thinking up something new.

"My dear, where is the mushroom catsup?" he said now with a sharp, triumphant glance at his wife.

With a look of heavy despair, Mrs. Griggs rang the bell. "Susan, is there any mushroom catsup?" It was produced, rather to Mr. Griggs's disappointment, and the meal was allowed to proceed.

"Delie's so busy studying Nesta that she's hardly eating a thing," said Bessie mischievously.

Delie flushed as she felt every eye turned on her. She had been unconsciously staring; her mind full of the work ahead, she had been noting the warm olive tone of Nesta's complexion, the shadows at the corner of mouth and nose, the rather arrogant curve of nostril and lip, and the deep brown eyes.

"How shall I pose for you, Delie? Like this?" Nesta rested her elbows on the table, locked her fingers beneath her chin, and turned up her eyes in an exaggerated pose.

The others laughed. Delie did not smile; she was furious. The food seemed to choke on the solid lump of rage in her throat. For the rest of the meal she kept her eyes on her plate.

The others did not notice, or affected not to notice, her silence; but as they were leaving the dining-room Nesta took her arm in a warm grasp, and whispered, "Don't be cross, Philadelphia dear. Come on, we'll shut ourselves away from them all, and I'll do just what you say."

The magnetism of her touch, the words that made them allies again, melted Delie's resentment at once. She followed into the

small room which had been set aside for her to work in. Nesta was as good as she had promised, and at the end of an hour she had several crayon sketches, one of which would work up into the portrait she wanted. She had caught the indolent curve of hand and wrist, the intent but dreaming expression in the dark eyes, that had first stirred her interest.

On Saturday she went without lunch so as to get the crayon sketch transferred to the prepared canvas. Excitement moved her as she felt the whole conception grow in her mind's eye. The highest lights would be on the brow and eyes, the white hand lying in the lap, and a light-covered book thrown down on the table by the sitter's elbow.

When she arrived at Bessie's her fingers were itching for the brush, and she chafed under the necessity of being polite to Mrs. Griggs. Midday dinner was just finished, and she insisted on Delie taking a cup of tea with them at the table.

"You're quite sure you've had your lunch, child?"

"Quite sure," lied Delie firmly.

"Oh, Delie lives on the smell of a painty rag," said Bessie. She liked her food, and was beginning to take on the same opulent curves as her mother.

Delie laughed, and took a dingy paint-rag out of her satchel. "Ah, that smells better than a roast dinner," she said, sniffing with closed eyes. "Do come on, Nesta."

They talked of many subjects while she worked, with intervals of warm and friendly silence. Delie found herself in agreement with most of Nesta's ideas; though sometimes a flash of that arrogance or intolerance that was part of Nesta's nature would antagonise her.

But there was something wrong. She could not get the pose the same. The attitude was right, but the expression of the eyes had changed. They seemed to be smouldering with some inward excitement; they would not dream.

"What's happened to you since I did the sketch?" she asked. "Something has stirred you up and altered your face. I'll simply leave it for the present."

"I don't know why I should look any different." But Nesta

looked down with a secretive smile about her full lips.

Delie concentrated on getting the hands right. "Look at the hands in an old master," Daniel Wise used to say, "and then at the hands in any modern portrait. It's enough to tell you whether the man can paint."

The portrait progressed rapidly, Delie giving up all her spare time to it. Brenton complained that she was neglecting him; he seemed so remote and changed that she became alarmed, and promised him the next day's lunch-hour, as Nesta had a luncheon engagement and she had only been going to work on the background.

"I'm engaged for lunch myself tomorrow, as a matter of fact," said Brenton. "So you may as well work on your picture."

"I'm worried about it. There's a sort of suppressed excitement about her—I think myself it's a man—and I can't get the expression of the eyes right."

"She has strange eyes," said Brenton.

The next Thursday was the last sitting before Nesta returned to Melbourne. To Delie's joy she found what had been missing: the intent, dreaming gaze, fixed upon some vision over the horizon, had come back, and a small, involuntary smile curved the full lips.

"That's it! That's just the expression I want! Oh, I'll have to paint out half your face and start again."

Her brush flew between palette and canvas. The power and the glory had descended upon her; she could do nothing wrong. When at last she had finished she gazed upon her work and found it good, though still far below what she had dreamed.

"It's excellent, Delie! I really would like to buy it," said Nesta warmly.

"No. It's not for sale."

By the time the *Philadelphia* was due to leave, Delie wished she had the time over again to spend it all with Brenton. She went aboard one night when the crew was ashore, to sign insurance papers and joint indemnity risks; and finished up, as before, in his bunk. This time it was less of an ordeal; she felt refreshed and

renewed, utterly new, as if they were Adam and Eve waking on the first morning in Eden. Adam and Eve . . . 'Oh, Adam,' she thought with compunction, 'how utterly I had forgotten you!'

But Brenton was there, was alive, she felt beneath her ear the steady, strong thumping of his heart. She thought of that strong heart stopping, of this whole warm person, living, breathing, loving, thinking, being turned to a handful of helpless dust.

She clasped him in anguish. "Brenton! Promise me not to die."

"Afraid I'll have to, some time."

"You mustn't die! You mustn't!" She began to weep, kneeling beside him and rocking back and forth, her long dark hair falling over her face, as if she already mourned over his dead body.

"You silly creature!" he said lovingly, twining a long strand about his wrist. "I promise you not to die for at least twenty years."

"I've been afraid you might go to this horrid war in South Africa."

"Not me! I've woke up to just what a horrid war it is. Why should we go and help the British empire-wallahs to shoot a lot of blokes like ourselves, because they wouldn't pay unjust taxes? All the Boers wanted was freedom, to be let alone."

"Brenton! You're a pro-Boer."

"Too flaming right I am. And anti-war. I don't believe in killing my fellow-men just because a lot of politicians and high-ups tell me it's the noble thing to do."

"Pro-Boer, anti-war," she chanted. She had never heard such sentiments expressed, and she was rather shocked. Pro-Boers were always spoken of as the lowest type of human beings, next to the Boers themselves: "them blasted Boojies" as she had heard the caretaker at the Institute, a veteran of Crimea, refer to them.

She realised now for the first time, that there were Boer girls in South Africa at that very moment taking leave of soldier-lovers with the same anguished cry: "You mustn't get killed, you mustn't!"

Towards midnight there were voices on the high part of the

wharf above. She leapt up, suddenly conscious of her position, of the defying of convention it implied. She saw her conduct from the point of view of her dead mother, of Mrs. McPhee, even of Bessie Griggs. All of society seemed to be lined up, pointing an accusing finger at her.

"Don't get in such a panic," said Brenton, as she hastily dressed and pinned up her hair with shaking hands. "It's only some late revellers trying to find their boat."

And in fact the noisy voices were dying away towards the other end of the wharf. She relaxed, and wandered about the confined space of the cabin, looking at his two neat hairbrushes in their circular leather case, picking up a book or two from the little built-in shelves. One was a small volume of selections from Shelley. Idly opening the cover, she saw inscribed on the fly-leaf in green ink, "A farewell gift. N."

It did not look new, but the handwriting was familiar, she had seen it when Nesta had dropped a note at her boarding-house to say that she was sorry she could not sit the next day.

"N!" she repeated aloud, while she stared at the writing, square upright, with the letters separated almost like printing. And green ink! The blood began to drum in her ears. "Did Nesta give you this?"

"Oh, that!" He leant over casually and took it from her hand. "Yes, she did, as a matter of fact."

"But, Brenton!" She stared at him, her blue eyes wide and troubled. "I didn't know you'd even met her, except for that day when we all came on board."

"Oh, yes, we met several times. It was her I took to lunch the other day." He looked self-conscious, though he smiled lightly.

"But why not tell me? And why didn't she tell me? I don't understand."

"Well, she had no idea of the relationship between you and me, unless you told her; and naturally I didn't."

"No, of course not. But why didn't you tell me?"

"Don't know, I suppose I was afraid of a scene. Thought you might be jealous, and wild with me for taking her away from a sitting."

"Jealous! Of course I'm not jealous. Why, you hardly know her." She laughed, but a question remained unanswered.

Nesta was so very attractive. She had felt the attraction herself, of that warm and vital person. And Brenton too; they were of a kind.

She shook the uneasy feeling from her, determined not to show any unworthy suspicions. After all she and Brenton had been to each other, it was just impossible that he could be seriously interested in anyone else.

CHAPTER TWELVE

That little seed of suspicion, once planted in her mind, sprouted and grew until all her happiness was overshadowed by its dark growth. Unable to sleep, Delie rose, lit the lamp, and went over to the portrait of Nesta standing on an easel against the wall.

The long dark eyes gazed out at her, dreamingly intent upon some remembered vision, the full lips curved secretively. With an angry movement she turned the picture towards the wall.

Next day, unable to concentrate, she moved restlessly about her little room at the studios. At last, when the mail train from Melbourne had come in, she asked for permission to go up to the post office to get a letter she was expecting from Melbourne.

At the post office, when the Melbourne mail had been sorted, she bought some stamps and remarked casually that she was going down to the wharf, and if there was any mail for the *Philadelphia* she would take it. The clerk, who knew her and her connection with the steamer, looked through the pigeon-holes with maddening deliberation.

There were three letters, two for the mate and one for the captain. She did not let her eyes drop to them till she was out in the street. Then she saw the handwriting she had expected—unmistakable, in green ink, with a Toorak postmark.

Her first feeling was one of rage, that left her weak and shaking. She turned off to the right instead of going straight to the wharf.

and went down between the bordering gum-trees towards the river. She wanted to tear the letter in shreds and scatter them in the water.

She also wanted, very badly, to open and read it. But if she did so he would despise her, and her suspicions might be unfounded; while if she sealed it up again without telling him she would despise herself. Best to destroy it at once.

Putting the others under her arm, she took the letter in two hands to tear it across. No! Best to confront him with it. She could not bear this suspense of not knowing. She took her handkerchief from under her cuff and wiped her sweating palms.

At the wharf, Brenton was busy taking on stores, directing the men in placing a dangerous cargo of cartridges to be delivered to a Darling station.

He was stripped to the waist. She averted her eyes from his muscular chest and satiny skin that gleamed in the sun, very white where it was not tanned. He came towards her smiling.

Suddenly bringing the letter out from behind her back, she presented it to him with a stony look. His hands were grubby, but he did not ask her to put it in his cabin. He frowned quickly, took the letter and slipped it into his hip-pocket.

"I brought the mail, as I had to go to the post office," she said with an effort at casualness. "There are two for the mate as well."

"Better put them up in his cabin. He's off duty today. I'll see you up there in a minute."

She turned stiffly and went up the steps, and after putting the letters in the mate's little cabin went into Brenton's cabin next door. She hunted quickly for the little volume of Shelley, and found it slipped under some papers on the table.

Opening it, she looked at the inscription again, and leafed quickly through the pages. She caught sight of a line of green ink marking one verse. With the blood beginning to pound in her head until she felt as if it would burst, she read:

When passion's trance is overpast,
If tenderness and truth could last
Or live, while all wild feelings keep

THE RIVER AND THE TOWN

Some mortal slumber, dark and deep,
I should not weep, I should not weep!

The book fell out of her hand to the floor. She heard his step behind her.

"Brenton!" Faintness, accusation, unbelief made her voice waver uncertainly.

He sat down on the side of the bunk, his splendid shoulders naked and beautiful, and looked at her with candid blue-green eyes.

"Brenton, there is something between you!"

"No; it's over."

"Where is the letter?"

"I tossed it overboard."

"Without reading it?"

"No; I read it first. It was just to say good-bye."

"There's been everything between you, hasn't there? Just as much as between you and me?"

"In a way, yes." His vivid eyes looked puzzled and almost hurt, but not guilty.

"But . . . how *could* you?" She sat down suddenly on the bunk beside him; her legs had given way. Tears began to run down her cheeks in a scalding stream.

"Don't cry, Phil darling. It's not what you think." He wrinkled his brows in an effort to explain. "You couldn't be expected to understand, but . . . she looks at these things almost as a man does. And . . . well, she has a terrific urge."

"No doubt. Also a terrific amount of money," she said wildly.

His face darkened. "She didn't buy me, if that's what you mean. But I knew I was only another experience for her, one of many. She was no virgin."

"And do you feel that excuses your conduct?"

"Of course it doesn't, not from your point of view. But it's quite different with you. I'd like to be married to you, I don't really want anyone else. But you stirred me up, and then left me unsatisfied. You seemed to be always busy painting, or in a hurry to get home."

"That was because you hurt me so much."

"Hurt you?" He stared at her, while she blew her nose miserably. "Delie, why didn't you tell me? You're such a little thing." He pulled her close to him and began caressing her taut face, smoothing the straight brows with one finger. She stiffened with resistance, but as always her bones seemed to melt at his touch. She tried feebly to push him away.

"Don't. You could go from me to her, and from her to me, as though it meant nothing. Do you even remember that I am me, Philadelphia Gordon, or do I just become woman to you, any woman?"

"Oh, help!" He groaned, and stopped her mouth with a kiss. "Why can't you enjoy life, dear child? All this thinking and talking, and talking and thinking . . . it doesn't mean anything. This is what's real."

"Oh, don't! Please don't."

"You like it, you know you do."

"Let me go!" She struggled away from him. "I don't know if ever want to see you again. I'm horribly mixed up."

"You're going to see me again."

"I don't know, I don't know!" She dabbed at her eyes, peered in the mirror, and straightened her hair. Her feelings were indeed confused. He should surely be on his knees begging her forgiveness; yet somehow he had managed to put her in the wrong. Her foot kicked something, and she stooped quickly, picked up the volume of poems, and threw it hard out of the little window. As it splashed into the river she felt better.

After a half-hearted attempt to eat tea in her room that night, Delie went to the easel and turned the portrait about. The calm, secret smile, the dreaming eyes, looked out at her with what seemed like deliberate mockery. She knew what memory those eyes were dreaming over; she knew now what that smile meant. The cat that had eaten the cream

In a red rage, she picked up a knife and stabbed at the painted eyes. Then she slashed the face and arms, until the canvas hung in gashes and ribbons. Then, trembling, she sank on the

bed, flinging the knife on the floor. She felt as if she had murdered her own child.

Later she got a pencil and writing-pad and wrote to Brenton, telling him she was going to Melbourne and that there could be nothing more between them. There were pages of it, vehemently and badly written, in a savage, careless scrawl—recriminations, soul-searchings, face-savings:

It was not that I really loved you, I took to you as some men take to drink or drugs, in order, to forget someone else . . .

When he came for her two nights later she was surprised to find her heart thudding with excitement, as though she had not, quite definitely, decided that she did not love him.

His brilliant eyes searched for hers, though she tried to avoid them, and his mouth twisted into a wryly humorous grin, as though he deprecated his inability to look more guilty and down-cast.

That mouth—at the thought of the other mouth, not hers, that it had so lately pressed, such a pang went through her that she gasped as with a physical pain. And all the hot, salty tears she had dropped into the book she tried to read herself to sleep with last night; great many-pointed stars of salt had been left on the pages as they dried. And he could smile!

“Did you get my letter?” she said stiffly as they walked up Hare Street.

“Yes; but I’m not going to answer it, at least not in writing. We could go on writing at cross-purposes for years, and only waste a lot of paper. Words! They muck up the real business of living.”

She thrust out her bottom lip obstinately, but did not reply.

When they were in Stacey’s waiting for their order, she told him what she had decided: to sell him her share in the steamer and use the money to go to Melbourne and study art.

“Tom would have been disappointed,” said Brenton, soberly, “to think that you had no share in her. Is that what you want?”

She fingered some crumbs on the cloth, not looking at him. “I

don't know what I want, except to get away! Perhaps I could keep a quarter share. If I had three hundred in cash I could live on it for three years."

"Materials for painting would have to come out of that."

"Yes, and fees for tuition. I'd get a cheap room somewhere."

"Well, I hope you can do it on that, because three hundred is about all I could raise at present, after the outlay on stores and repairs. You know you should share in the buying of stores if you're going to share in the trading profits; but Tom didn't insist on it and I won't either."

"Brenton!" Her cheeks were pink. "Why didn't you tell me! It always seemed like a miracle to me, the money just coming in like that. I just didn't realise. I'm hopeless at money matters. You must take back that fifty, or half of it, anyway."

"Rats! You're going to need all of that."

"But I can't keep it . . . don't you see . . . after what has happened between us. It would seem as if I were being paid——"

"Don't talk like that!" he said roughly, grasping her restless fingers. "If you say bloody silly things like that, I'll kiss you right here in front of everybody."

The waitress came with fried Murray cod, and they began to eat mechanically, intensely conscious of each other.

"You're to write to me from Melbourne, and let me know pronto if you get into any strife. I should think that whenever we're in a Victorian port I'll be popping down to Melbourne, even if it's only for a day."

"I'm not alone in the world, I still have my guardian. You don't have to be so protective."

"You independent little devil!" he said. "I believe you still love me, all the same."

She would not meet his eyes, and remained obstinately silent.

When they were in the street again he took her hand and locked his fingers through hers. He looked down at her with bright, compelling eyes. Because he was going tomorrow, his face became more dear; the way his hair grew in tight curls, the set of his ears against his head, seemed to pierce her with love.

"We'll go for a walk by the river," he said. "You're going to let me say good-bye to you, aren't you?"

"Yes . . . I suppose so, yes," she sighed.

As soon as they were below the sheltering slope of the river-bank he took her in his arms. With her face pressed against his solid shoulder, she felt all the tension, misery, and bitterness of the last two days fall away. 'Peace,' she thought, 'this is peace, the peace that passeth understanding.'

Delie went down to the wharf to see her namesake set out. The spring freshets of melted snow-water were following the winter rains, and the river was rising steadily; all was noise and bustle on the high, curving wharf.

Watching the endless flow of water until it was hidden by the next bend, thinking of the Southern Ocean towards which it flowed, and the clouds that rose from the sea to fall as snow or rain, she felt herself at the heart of a mystery. Time, that everlasting stream, might bear her far from this place; yet this moment would always exist, just as this point in space would still exist when she no longer occupied it; even when she stood within sound of the breakers on the final shore.

And there below lay the *Philadelphia*, with her name freshly painted on the wheel-house. Was it possible that she would never see her again? She could not believe it. The rhythm of the river had got into her blood, and one day it would draw her back.

She went on board and had a last look round. In the wheel-house she turned the wheel a little, touching the big spokes where Brenton's hands would rest. She peeped into the saloon where her picture of the boat seemed to bring the sunlit river into the dark, panelled space.

Down on the main deck again she shook hands formally with Brenton, wished him luck on his voyage, and stepped back across the gangplank.

As she was groping for the stairs up to the higher levels, her eyes misted with tears, Brenton dashed across the gangplank and kissed her in full view of the crew. They cheered loudly, all but Ah Lee and the engineer, who scowled and said, "'Ow much

longer d'you expect me to keep steam up in this 'eap of junk?" as he wiped his fingers on his oily cloth cap.

Standing on top of the wharf in the sunlight, Delie watched the paddles begin to churn, the milky bubbles froth against the piles, as the steamer edged out and turned downstream. With a long, echoing, infinitely moving peal from her whistle, she disappeared around the Campaspe bend.

PART TWO

The City and the Plains

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A slanting curtain of rain was driven along Swanston Street by the cold wind, buffeting the passengers just emerging from Flinders Street station, beating on dejected cab-horses, sweeping up the hill, and darkening the massive grey pillars of the National Gallery to almost black.

Inside, the gloomy bays were lit with artificial light, and a few dispirited visitors drifted from picture to picture, conversing in funereal whispers. The attendants, sitting aloof, looked like undertakers who had given up all hope of business.

In the lofty downstairs rooms where the students of the Gallery School worked at their drawings and canvases, a pale grey light from the sky came through the tall windows. A bell shrilled through the building; the nude model in the Life class relaxed upon the dais; students in the Still-Life room wiped their brushes and blinked their eyes, suddenly aware of tired backs, a foot that had gone to sleep, the coldness of the winter morning.

One of them, a slender girl who was remarkable for the amount of paint she had managed to get on her person as well as on to the canvas, seemed not to have heard. She continued to work with concentration through the sudden clatter as the others began to pack up satchels and sketching-boxes, and to put their easels back against the wall.

"You can leave it for now, Miss Gordon," said the instructor, dark and dapper with his thick moustache and clean-shaven chin. "Don't forget to put your easel back, will you?"

"No, Mr. Hall." She looked after his retreating back as though dazed, her deep blue eyes remote, still focused on the idea of the picture she had been working on. She wiped back a wisp of dark hair from her forehead, and left there a smudge of yellow alizarin.

She hated this working to a time-table, having to stop before she was ready, and to begin slowly and fumblingly again when

the creative mood was not upon her. She removed her smock after cleaning her brushes with turpentine, and washed her hands and face in the little washroom with its warning notice: BRUSHES ARE NOT TO BE WASHED IN HAND-BASINS.

At the front doors a plump young man, a fellow student, was waiting to relieve her of her satchel. She had no class this afternoon and was going home to lunch.

"Come up to town and I'll buy you a hot coffee, Del," he said, looking at her pale, thin cheeks. "You never look as if you get enough to eat."

"Sorry, Jeremy. Imogen is expecting me; she's made one of her curries."

"It won't hurt you to have a hot drink first," said Jeremy obstinately.

"I suppose not." But she did not look at him. She despised herself for accepting the drinks and lunches and afternoon teas he bought her, and which she could not have afforded herself; but she must not get ill, and she needed something hot after a chilly lesson in the studio, or a landscape class out of doors in winter.

Jeremy was fond of food, and too lazy ever to make an artist. She did not admire him, but . . . "a girl must live", as Imogen was fond of saying. She made a half-hearted attempt to take back her satchel, and then walked on beside him, drawing up her coat collar against the rain.

A cable-tram was coming down the hill. Jeremy took a firm grip of her elbow and they ran across the splashing street in front of a trolley drawn by a steaming pair of brown horses. Delie leaned back in the tram, coughing a little; Jeremy looked at her anxiously.

"Are you warm enough? Sure? Would you like my scarf? Melbourne is a good place to be out of in the middle of winter."

"Oh no; I love it in all weathers. You don't know what it means to me to be here, after a country town."

It was not quite a year since she had come to Melbourne, yet she felt as if she belonged here. When she came in by Prince's Bridge on a smoky, misty morning, and saw the reflections of

trees and buildings in the calm Yarra, the tall grey spires of St. Paul's, the streams of people and traffic hurrying along, the parks so green and smooth under the dark bare trees, her heart lifted with an excitement that was always new.

This for her was the City, the epitome of all the great cities of the world. Here she had found her spiritual home. A lively art movement had been stirring since Tom Roberts came back from Europe five years ago with first-hand experience of Impressionism; and as in an Impressionist painting the air seemed to quiver with life, the impalpable ferment of ideas.

She was not quite in sympathy with Bernard Hall, the Art School master; but she found the drawing master, Frederick McCubbin, with his big walrus moustache and bright eyes twinkling with enthusiasm and humour, a delightful person to work with.

She was happy in her work in this southern city. It was only on days like this, when the bitter wind caught in her throat, that she sometimes thought nostalgically of her old home, Echuca, with its delightful, sunny winter climate.

On New Year's Day she had joined in the city's celebration of the new Commonwealth; and later in its mourning for Queen Victoria, when she had worn a purple silk blouse for a whole week.

Echuca, which as a border town had long chafed under Customs restrictions, had apparently gone mad on Federation Day, 1901. Her uncle had sent her the cuttings from the *Riverine Herald*, a special edition printed entirely in bright blue ink. . . .

But Echuca, the cramping work in the photographic shop, the seasonal life of the river, were far away to the northward, and receding daily farther in time. She had just got off a tram at Little Collins Street, Melbourne. . . .

It was still raining, but more lightly, in a fine drizzle. Obedient to the pressure of Jeremy's well-padded arm, she turned into an entrance and they made their way down the dark steps of a little coffee-shop.

Hurrying up the steep slope of Punt Road to the flat in South

Yarra that she shared with Imogen, Delie began to cough. Bronchitis had troubled her, in successive attacks, all the winter, and now this cough began whenever she hurried or got excited.

She slowed down and forced herself to breathe evenly. Her cheeks had begun to burn with a dry flush, and in spite of the cold she felt a sensation of heat and weakness through her limbs.

She was nearly home now; the next iron gates. One advantage of the flat, which was really the gardener's lodge of one of the big houses, was the large garden where they were able to make sketches of light and shade on fine Sunday mornings. The occupants of the house were friends of Imogen's mother, so they had the freedom of the garden. It was wonderful to Delie to have shaken off the deadly trappings of respectability, of heavy roast dinners and dressing for church, and all the time-frittering conventions of Sunday in a small town.

As she stepped on to the old stone-flagged veranda of the cottage there was a scuffle and a giggle from within. Treading as noisily as she could, she came into the living-room to find a young man standing by the window, pointedly looking out, and Imogen—small, black-haired, quick and yet sensuous as a cat in her movements—uncoiling herself from her divan-bed in the corner.

"I told you it's only Delie; she won't be shocked," she said mockingly.

The young man bowed, Delie smiled hastily and hurried through to the kitchen (the only other room), taking off her tam-o'-shanter and wet coat as she went. She was getting used to Imogen's amoral ways, but at first she *had* been shocked at the rapidity with which Imogen changed lovers, as some women change hats.

She turned off the stove and began to dish up the curry. She was hungry, and she hoped the young man would not be sharing the meal, which contained very little meat bodied forth with much rice. Imogen came in with another plate. "You won't mind if Alby stays to lunch, will you?" she said, smiling her oddly mechanical smile.

She looked hard at Delie with her pale green eyes, fringed with black lashes. "You're looking knocked up, darling. Are

you very damp? Go and sit down inside while I make the tea."

Imogen was inclined to mother her. There was something helpless about Delie Gordon in her vagueness and forgetfulness. She was always losing things, or getting lost herself, taking the wrong train and finding herself miles out of her right direction, or forgetting to get out at the right station. Even places she had visited half a dozen times she could not find again alone.

The other students regarded her with a half-irritated irony. She was late for appointments or didn't turn up at all, she broke their pet vases and tripped over their pet cats, she lost her purse and had to borrow her fare; but by now they were used to it.

Delie went back to the other room, lit the kerosene heater and crouched over its meagre warmth, breathing in its hot, oily smell. She tried to talk to Alby but she didn't know what to say to him.

He was very long and thin, pale and etiolated like a plant kept too long indoors, with a large soft moustache and eyes veiled by heavy lids. His voice was deep and drawling, which made him sound profoundly bored with life. He was not an artist, but a University student taking some vague Honours course which had already taken him years.

Delie was annoyed to find him here today, when Imogen had particularly asked her to come home to lunch. Not that she was jealous, of course; that would be ridiculous; but still . . .

Alby looked out of the window in a bored way and did not try to help the conversation which Delie, out of politeness, tried to keep up. She felt faintly irritated that he seemed unaware of her as a woman; but she was too tired and cold to be piqued into an attempt to interest him. She felt suddenly, desolately lonely; and, as often happened, she imagined how different it would be if Brenton had been there instead.

Imogen came in with three steaming plates on a tray. She had divided the curry evenly, eking it out with triangles of buttered toast. It had been intended for two only, and then Alby, who never seemed to have lectures in the mornings, had turned up. She set down the tray and put up her hands to tighten the silver ear-ring on her left ear.

Alby gave an exaggerated shudder. "I can't *bear* to see you do that."

"What, my angel?"

"That *cold* metal biting into your flesh."

"Poof, it only pinches a bit. I should get my lobes pierced."

"Don't!" Alby shuddered again. "I shan't be able to eat a *mouthful*."

'Good thing,' thought Delie, 'there's not enough to go round anyway.' But though he eyed his food with distaste, the young man disposed of it quite rapidly.

There was some fruit for dessert, but nothing else. Delie still felt hungry. She decided to have some biscuits later. As they were sipping their claret afterwards, Alby cried dramatically, "Stop! Don't move!"

Imogen paused with her glass at her lips. "You see?" said Alby, throwing himself back in his chair with his long legs spread under the table. "You see the light on her cheek, on the glass, the *je ne sais quoi* of her whole pose?" He turned to Delie earnestly. "I have the eye, the sensibility, of an artist, but not the—er—the execution."

Imogen set her glass down suddenly. "I forgot, Del. There's a telegram for you. It's on the mantelpiece."

Delie got up and tore the envelope open slowly, with the premonition of disaster which telegrams always rouse. But as she read the words the flush deepened slowly in her thin cheeks, her pupils dilated, her eyes seemed to grow larger. She looked up at Imogen with an intent blue stare from her shining eyes.

"I know! Brenton's coming down," said Imogen.

"Yes. Arriving tonight." She looked down again at the brief words: ARRIVING TONIGHT 6.30 p.m. TRAIN FROM ECHUCA LOVE BRENTON.

Brenton was coming! She lifted her tight skirt well above her ankles, and did an energetic *pas seul* round the table, taking a kick at a half-finished canvas leaning against the wall.

"You'll have to take me out tonight, Alby. Out *late*," said Imogen. "Off you go now, Delie will want to start decorating the flat. Meet you at half-past seven at the post office."

Alby was staring. He had never seen Imogen's friend so animated.

Delie was so afraid that she would be late, or the train would be early, that at six o'clock she was already waiting outside the barrier, in a cold fever of excitement. She felt faint and sick, her mouth was dry, and her cold hands trembled. There was no torment like this last half-hour of waiting.

She should really have had something to eat. It was a long time since that unsatisfying lunch, but she could not eat in this churned-up condition. Instead she had to hurry away to the retiring-room. In the mirror over the wash-basins she stared at her own pale face. Was she very thin? Would he find her changed? The filmy scarf wound about her dark hair and tied beneath her chin framed her hollow cheeks and made them look rounder. Her lips were a healthy rose-red.

Reassured, she went back to the platform. But here her fears began again. It was a year since they had met, since she had told him she never wanted him to make love to her again. How would he greet her, what would she say?

Two letters had come from him, from somewhere up the Darling, mostly about the steamer's adventures and the state of the rivers. His letters had always come from strange and faraway places. Now he was coming himself, and would bring with him a breath of the far outback, of the sun-warm rivers and the great dry plains through which they wandered.

Above her head the platform clock showed a steady 6.30, the hour of the northern train's expected arrival. She began to feel as if time really stood still. He would never come. She would stand for ever under a stopped clock, looking at two empty rails which disappeared into the misty darkness of a winter night.

A train whistled with a shrill, echoing peal, like the *Philadelphia* blowing off at the Campaspe junction . . . Porters began to hurry up the platform, wheeling luggage-carriers, the crowd surged forward. She hung back behind the iron gates, feeling as if she might faint.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

In the restaurant, in the light of the shaded candle that burned on their table, she looked bemusedly into his sea-blue eyes. It was all strangely like a dream; she scarcely knew what they had talked of, though they had talked happily and eagerly all the way from the station.

As soon as his hand touched hers, all her fear and weakness disappeared, and she floated calmly as a ship in harbour. They had walked hand-in-hand through the crowds, and as the dark streams of people broke and eddied past them, she had felt that they were the real, the focal point in an unreal and fluid world.

Now she watched him eat with his old gusto, winding hot spaghetti round his fork and shovelling it in with speed and precision.

"You're not eating, darling." He stopped and regarded her anxiously.

"I like to watch you."

"But I like to see *you* eat. You're looking much thinner. Have you been to see a doctor in Melbourne?"

"No, whatever for?"

"I don't like that cough I noticed as we were walking for the tram."

"Oh, it only starts when I get a bit out of breath. It's nothing."

"All the same, you ought to see a doctor."

"But I can't afford it."

He took out a wallet and counted a pile of notes on to the table. "Your share of this year's earnings."

She looked at him under her straight brows. "But I only have a quarter-interest now. Brenton, we've had this out before. I'm not going to take a quarter of the profits and put nothing back into the boat. You put nearly everything back into improvements and repairs and buying stores. You spend hardly anything on yourself."

"Well—I regard it as an investment. And I pay myself a salary

of twenty pounds a month. There is one simple solution to these arguments—let's get married, and then it will adjust itself."

She looked down at the cloth. She had unwound the filmy scarf from her hair, and let it fall back about her shoulders, and from its soft folds her slender white neck rose like the stem of a flower.

"Don't let's talk about that now," she said almost inaudibly.

"All right." He lifted his glass of Riesling. "To the most beautiful eyes in Victoria."

She smiled, then divided the pile of notes in two, without counting them, and handed half back to him. "That's to buy stores, and paint, and so on. I regard it as an investment too."

He scowled, but put the notes back in his wallet. "You're the most obstinate, the most pig-headed little devil I've ever met. You're to let me know at once if you get into difficulties over money."

"We're always in difficulties, Imogen and I, but we manage."

"Living on dry crusts in a garret, I suppose. You artists!"

"We live, that's the main thing."

"You might die."

He said it so soberly that a thrill of fear went through her. Could there really be anything wrong with her lungs? That cough, and the feeling of exhaustion in the mornings . . . She pushed the lurking fear out of sight, and closed a door in her mind firmly upon it.

When they had finished the second bottle of wine she realised that she'd had more to drink than ever in her life before, in fact she was quite light-headed. When they rose to go, she needed his guiding hand under her elbow to steer her among the tables. She seemed to float down the stairs without touching more than one or two with her feet.

As the cold night air filled her lungs, a wild exuberance seized her. She danced and twirled along the street. It was not just the wine, but everything: the bright shop-fronts, the noise of traffic, the electric lights, the fact that she was twenty-one and walking with her lover at night through the streets of a great city. 'I'm drunk, I am drunk,' she said to herself exultantly, looking up at

the faint revolving stars. Drunk with wine, and happiness, and youth, and hope, and love.

She savoured the new experience, recording it on that inward sensitive plate on which, as on a photograph, all the events of her life were printed indelibly, to flash upon the eye of memory long after they had seemed forgotten.

Her earliest memory was of digging moss, bright green and velvety, from between the old red bricks of a wall that towered above her head—the earthy smell, the texture of the moss, the contrast of emerald and old rose, were as real to her now as then. Experience—she welcomed it all, she wanted to explore life, that great river, to its most hidden backwaters and billabongs.

“I believe you’d enjoy having your leg amputated,” Imogen said to her once. “You’d be sitting up, noting with interest what it felt like to have a leg cut off.”

“How early can you remember?” she asked Brenton as he checked her wild gyrations and looked about for a cab.

“Oh, I don’t know; back to when I was about five, I should think. My earliest memory is of my mother sitting on the side of her bed crying, because of something my father had said or done; and of how I wished I was big enough to hurt him for hurting her.”

“I can remember much further back than that, it’s a coloured memory, rose-red and green; before I was three; a wall of my grandfather’s garden. Do you know, I believe I must have been born with a feeling for colour. When I was five I dipped one of our White Leghorn fowls into a bowl of pink dye. Its feathers turned a most delicate shade of pink, but they were all gummed together by the dye, and after staggering about a bit it succumbed. I cried, because I was scared of getting into trouble, but Father said it showed a scientific and enquiring mind. And then one day when Mother left us with an aunt, John and I found a tin of paint and painted her front door with red roofing paint, and I got it all in my hair. . . .”

The words were bubbling out of her in a continuous flood, she would have talked all the way back to the flat, but he silenced her with kisses. When they arrived, they found the lamp alight

and a well-banked, glowing fire in the grate.

Brenton pulled the divan in front of the fire and drew her down on his knees.

"I said," she murmured drowsily, "I said I never wanted to see you again."

"Yes. And you said you wanted no further share in the *Philadelphia*. But you still own a quarter of her; and you still want to see me."

"Yes."

"And you still want me to make love to you."

"No."

"Yes, you do." And he began slowly, seriously to undress her.

"We don't need the lamp," she said, overcome with shyness.

"Yes, we do. I want to see you. There is this dear little mole here, and there are these branching blue rivers that I must explore down, down through the dark forest to the sea . . ." he said, kissing each part as it was uncovered.

"Ah, Captain Sturt!" she said, laughing, deeply content. This was not the first voyage of discovery he had embarked on, she knew; how many Nestas had there been in his life? But she felt invulnerable now; not even the thought of Nesta could hurt her. Nor was she the same person as a year ago. Time had flowed softly, imperceptibly onward, carrying her to this new point of view. Looking back at her life so far, she felt that she had died and been reborn many times, though a thread of memory joined her various selves.

It was two hours before they thought of Imogen's possible return, and reluctantly got up, drugged and weary; but even as they slowly dressed and straightened the bed, they kept drawing together to stand locked in a peaceful embrace, warmed by the memory of desire. Brenton, still intent on 'feeding her up', made toast on the sinking fire, and they ate from the same piece, exchanging buttery kisses.

The cloakroom where he had left his bag closed at eleven, but he still lingered, saying for the third time, "We ought to get married."

She sighed and bit her lip. "You know it's impossible."

"*Why* is it impossible?" Now that he had come round to the idea of marriage, her resistance filled him with impatience.

"Because . . . because I want to be a painter, and then . . . we have different ideas. I couldn't share you with a succession of Nestas."

"I've told you that she meant nothing to me, except as a sort of challenge. I'm surprised at you being jealous of someone like that. A girl of your intelligence——"

"I can't help it, Brenton. I couldn't help being possessive with you."

"I'm afraid you'll marry some long-haired artist bloke, and I'll never see you again."

"I promise you I won't marry anyone. I just want to work. But . . . oh, I do want to be with you always, and travel up and down the river! And then the life here isn't quite up to what I'd expected. I mean, sometimes when we were sketching in the little back yard behind the Gallery, isolated in a sort of—of religious devotion to Art (please don't laugh, I've never tried to express this to anybody before), sometimes then I felt as if I were at the very summit of existence. But I've been disillusioned a bit since . . .

"I've found that Bernard Hall isn't God, and that most of the others haven't that high seriousness which makes priests and devotees, and perhaps I haven't it really either . . . You're not listening, are you?"

"No. All sounds like rot to me. You're a woman, and I'm asking you for the fourth time: Will you marry me?"

She only said obstinately: "It wouldn't work."

She longed to say yes, but some deep instinct warned her that it would be wrong. She must go on with her painting, she had to be true to something in herself.

He left in rather a surly mood, and the next day they parted at the station with stiff faces, almost like strangers. To cover the hurt to his pride he had adopted a rough, jeering tone. In his twenty-nine years he had not before encountered a woman who could resist him when he was determined to get his own way.

As soon as his train had gone she felt an overwhelming desolation, and the next day, after a sleepless night, she wanted to rush to the post office and send a wire, "Will marry you at once." But still that instinct held her back.

She was engaged on an interesting study in the Still-Life class, and when it was completed she received what was high praise from Mr. Hall: "H'm! I don't often get that quality of work from students." She became fired with new ambition, to be the first woman to win the travelling scholarship, won two years ago by Max Meldrum and available every three years.

There was a tradition of good portraitists winning it; there was less sympathy with landscape at the Gallery School, and it was in landscape that she felt her true power. But she meant to try. She worked hard, keeping under her longing for Brenton.

In the Melbourne Art Gallery there were many reproductions of Old Masters, for one of the conditions of the travelling scholarship was that the winner should send back copies of the masterpieces in the overseas galleries he visited.

Delie studied these with interest, but went back again and again to four Australian landscapes—Louis Buvelot's 'Summer Evening' and 'Waterpool at Coleraine'; David Davies's 'Moonrise, Templestowe'; and 'The Purple Noon's Transparent Might', by Streeton.

Buvelot, she could see, was the first artist in this country who had painted the unique anatomy of the gum-tree as it really was, and not as a kind of etiolated oak. Streeton had the native-born's appreciation of the dry grass, the burning blue and gold, of an Australian summer. And she could look for hours at Davies's lyrical impressionist study of twilight, with a sky as purely luminous as a pearl.

There was a painting of Frederick McCubbin's, 'Winter Evening', which interested her too, and she had seen works of his exhibited with the Victorian Artists' Society, that were so full of Australian atmosphere that they seemed to exhale the eucalyptus odour of the bush.

By long study of these pictures, by going close up and 'putting her nose into the paint', she learnt something of the artists'

technique; it was almost as if they stood beside her, instructing and encouraging. "See, it is done like this; those delicate gradations of colour and light can be conveyed . . ."

It was time to get ready for the spring exhibition of the Victorian Artists' Society. Several of the students who were members of the society were sorting out their best work for submission to the selection committee. Delie got out the only large canvas she had brought from Echuca, a study of a 'hatter's' camp at the Campaspe junction, with a wisp of blue smoke curling upwards against dark trees. With the money Brenton had brought her, she could now get it framed.

She entered another river picture, one that she had worked up from a sketch since coming to Melbourne, and two that she had done in class, a still-life and a landscape. Of her four paintings only one was returned by the committee; the 'Evening on the Campaspe', her most ambitious canvas, was accepted. But when varnishing day came and she went along to oil out her pictures, they looked incredibly small when hung beside all the others on a large wall, compared with their appearance at home in the flat.

Before opening day she had a new worry to take her mind off the exhibition; and in spite of her brave words to Brenton about not being afraid to have his child, the possibility that confronted her now filled her with terror.

She pored over the calendar and did sums in her head which would never come out right. She was vague over dates as over most things unconnected with painting, and thought perhaps there was no real cause for worry yet. But she did not feel well, and could eat nothing in the mornings.

She did not mention her worry to Imogen; to speak of what she feared would only make it more real. Her sleep was troubled. She woke several times each night in a clammy bath of sweat.

At last opening day came. Although she was only one of many, she felt sick with excitement at exposing her paintings to the public gaze for the first time. When the *Age* came the next morning she opened it at once to read the notice.

Imogen's single flower-piece was not mentioned; but half-way

down the column she saw: "Delphine Gordon is a newcomer whose work shows promising technique (especially in conveying the liquid, shifting brilliance of water) but a lack of originality. Her 'Evening on the Campaspe' is strongly reminiscent of Louis Buvelot. . . ."

Well! She had painted that picture in Echuca, before she had ever set eyes on a Buvelot. The river paintings were mentioned, but not the still-life into which an extra year of study and knowledge had gone.

She began to wonder, as she had wondered before, whether the academic teaching of the Gallery School was damaging rather than helping her art. Smith of the *Argus*, who bitterly hated the Impressionist school, did not mention her name.

By the end of the week, when her period had still not made an appearance, she could bear the suspense no longer. She walked along Upper Collins Street reading the names of doctors on their brass plates, and chose one at random. She gave her name as Mrs. Edward Brenton. She hated being examined, and her heart beat with fear of the strange doctor as well of the condition he might find.

When she emerged on to the street again, there was a feverish colour in her cheeks, her throat was dry, and her hands trembled. Feeling suddenly faint, she walked into a tea-shop and sat down, while she tried to adjust herself to the shattering news of the diagnosis.

She could not believe it yet: that her career in Melbourne was finished, that she would have to leave the art school and the possibility of the European scholarship behind her for ever.

The doctor had looked at her hands, taken her temperature, sounded her chest, and questioned her closely about her meals and sleeping habits; it had all seemed rather pointless to Delie, who wanted to know only one thing. And then, when he had completed his examination, he had mildly, quietly dropped the bombshell:

"I'm afraid you are suffering from tuberculosis in an early stage. Only one lung is affected. But you need rest in a warm,

dry climate if the disease is to be arrested. A sputum test would be necessary to confirm the diagnosis, but I feel quite certain."

At first she felt only relief; she was not going to have a baby. He would not advise a pregnancy in her present state of health, he said. Plenty of sun, plenty of rest, some good red wine with meals, and a tonic. . . .

She ordered some coffee mechanically, and sat staring at the wall. "I advise a move to an inland climate . . . Another winter in Melbourne may be your last . . ."

The coffee came, and she drank it without tasting it and ordered another. Her head was clearing now, but her cheeks still burned, her breath came short and quick. She felt a great longing for Brenton, to be able to look at this frightening thing from the shelter of his arms.

Brenton! What had he said? 'You might die.' And it was true, she might die, next winter might be her last. But she could not believe it. There was too much that she wanted to do, too much to be seen and known, there were too many pictures that she must paint. She couldn't die yet.

"You must move . . . Another winter in Melbourne . . . the inland would be ideal for a person with your complaint . . ."

Suddenly she felt tremendously happy. For weeks, ever since Brenton had gone back to Echuca, she had been fighting against her need for him. Now it was all decided for her. She would write at once, and tell Brenton she was coming back. Surely he would still want her even if she had only one lung, just as she would still want him if he lost a leg.

The waitress brought the second cup of coffee, and received a dazzling smile. Delie warmed her cold fingers on the cup. She had stopped trembling. She would return to the river, as she had always known she would. There, in that clean, eucalyptus-scented air, she would get well. She knew she would get well.

THE CITY AND THE PLAINS

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Delie was spending a short holiday in Bendigo with the McPhees before her wedding. Already her health was better, her cough had almost stopped. It was as if the conflict between her love and her longing for a life dedicated to art in the city had been tearing her apart.

Now that it was resolved for her she accepted the new life with happy relief. Nor would Brenton consider waiting for a year to see if the change of climate would cure her lung. He insisted that they should get married at once, that she should travel with him when the *Philadelphia* sailed again for the Darling and the dry, sunny plains of the West. He was not afraid of the disease.

She had been shocked at what two years had done to Angus McPhee. He seemed to have aged quite suddenly: it was rheumatoid arthritis, Mrs. Mac whispered. He shuffled along slowly with a stick, his big frame bent, his once powerful hands twisted and useless. Though his hair and beard were as thick as ever, his shrewd blue eyes had lost their sharp twinkle. They seemed dulled by the continuous pain from his inflamed and tortured joints.

When she was leaving, he presented Delie with a handsome cheque.

"Tae buy a wee pr-resent for yeself. Ye'll be needin' a sicht o' new furnishins ben the hoose."

"But I'll be living on a boat, Mr. McPhee. There's no room for much furniture, except for bunks."

"Livin on a boat! Och, harrk at the lassie! Livin on a wee sma' boat, wi'oot e'en a front gairden, and the bairns aye fallin' in the river and gettin' drooned!"

Delie laughed. "Well, there aren't any bairns yet, you know. I'll just have to teach them all to swim very young."

"She's not going to be a good river this year," said Brenton gloomily. "I dunno how we'll get past the Bitch an' Pups, or

even past Campbell's Island, with two barges."

"Well, why take two barges then? You only took one last year."

"Because now I'm a married man, with a wife to provide for," (he kissed her lightly) "I must make more money. Another bargeload of wool last year would have meant at least another five hundred pounds in freight."

"But *we*," said Delie, faintly stressing the joint pronoun, "would have had to pay another bargemaster and two more hands."

"Yes—about twenty pounds a month in wages, and look at the extra profit. No, I'm taking two."

Delie gave up the argument. She didn't really care how many barges there were, but she had noticed already that Brenton no longer made a pretence of consulting her over the running of the steamer. His idea of sharing their worldly goods seemed to be "What's yours is mine, but what's mine's my own".

"Of course," said Brenton, "it means the load won't have any insurance cover till we get past the 'Bidgee junction. We haven't a certificate from the Underwriters' Association for towing two barges."

"Then shouldn't we get a certificate?"

"Yes, but not for this trip. It takes too long. We should get away in a week or two. The bill of lading warranty only refers to towing downstream, so we'll be covered all right on the way back."

However he might try to exclude her, Delie was determined to take an intelligent interest in what was obviously the centre of her husband's life. She believed that he loved her, but love was not of the first importance to him. It was as well, she saw wisely, that she had her own work; and he would never be jealous of her other interest.

Brenton had given her his undivided attention for perhaps three days after their wedding. It was an impossible time to get married, of course; the *Philadelphia* had just come off 'Rotten Row', the dry dock, after an overhaul; word had come that the river was rising upstream, and Brenton was busy wiring for those

of his crew who were not in the town, signing on new members, and preparing to load.

For her wedding Delie had worn a cream serge costume and a hat with huge yellow roses. Bessie was rather scandalised, saying that she "wouldn't feel married herself" if she had no veil; but Delie had her own ideas and Brenton preferred as little fuss as possible.

She had been touched by her uncle's efforts to make himself presentable for 'giving the bride away'. Charles had evidently brushed his old-fashioned dark suit with care, his chin was freshly shaven and his hair had been cut; but there was a large hole in the heel of one of his black socks. At the wedding breakfast he drank too much whisky and became maudlin, the tears running unchecked from his red-rimmed eyes down into his moustache.

When they had first broken the news to him he did not seem pleased.

"Live on a boat!" he said dubiously. "I had hoped, dear," he said, taking Delie's hand in the front room, now sadly dusty and cobweb-draped, "I had hoped and expected that you would make a brilliant, er . . . With your looks, and your talents . . . However, I'm not a good one to advise anybody, I know. My own marriage . . ." He sighed.

His mournful eyes, unhealthily bloodshot, and his drooping, unkempt grey moustache moved in a melancholy smile. "However, as long as you are happy, I suppose . . ."

She noticed that he seemed unable to finish a sentence, but would let it trail off into an indistinguishable mumble. He wore elastic-sided boots down at the heel, corded riding-trousers and a not very clean shirt. It seemed odd to hear him cavil at Brenton Edwards as a husband for his niece—Brenton who had spruced himself up to meet her relative, his shining curls flattened with much brushing, his high collar spotless beneath his hard, clean jaw.

When she called him in, Charles was quite affable, rather flusteredly producing whisky and glasses. Brenton had been warned what to expect, and did not blink an eyelid at Charles's seedy appearance. He looked with interest at the faded elegance

of the room, the dusty pleated silk shading the candles on the piano, the lustre vases and threadbare gold brocade, the worn rose-flowered carpet.

Two young aboriginal women had come out of the kitchen when they arrived in a hired sulky, and fled giggling over the sandhills beyond the house. Delie remembered her first arrival here so many years ago, Lucy and Minna giggling behind the tank-stand.

Now Minna was dead, that lovely girl whose image Time had destroyed years before her death; Hester and Adam too. When Charles asked, with obvious reluctance, if she and Brenton would stay for a meal, she assured him that they must get back. Her old home was haunted by ghosts, most of all by Adam's young and troubled spirit.

Her uncle told her to choose something from the house for a wedding-present. Feeling that Hester would turn in her grave if she took any breakable treasure, she chose the tapestry-covered footstool on which she used to sit at Miss Barrett's knee in the old days. She still heard occasionally from Miss Barrett, who was now living in France; they had kept in touch, though their letters became less and less frequent.

After the wedding, the happy pair had gone to the Palace Hotel until the *Philadelphia* should be ready to leave. Brenton said he would have quite enough of sleeping with her in a narrow bunk; and the large double-bed was certainly more comfortable.

"You're looking better already," he said after the first week, parting the long dark hair that fell over her white shoulders, and delicately feeling her vertebrae with his fingers. "I can't count the bumps nearly so easily, and you don't look so hollow and dark around the eyes."

Her smallness, her fragility, even her delicate health delighted him, made him feel more strong and protective. He examined her slender, fine-boned feet, her little knee-caps, with the tender absorption of a child with a new doll.

He had used to like a more voluptuous type of figure, but now he was enamoured of small, pointed breasts and transparent skin through which the blue veins showed.

"It's just as well," he said, burying his face between her breasts,

"that we'll be sleeping in separate bunks on board. I'll be wearing you out. You know what the doctor said."

"He said I mustn't have a baby just yet, either."

"No. We must be very careful."

Delie felt sure that she was going to be happy ever after. She felt only pity for Imogen, leading a restless, unsatisfying life of violent affairs that never lasted; and a new sympathy for Bessie, now married to a prim, stiff-collared, anæmic young man who had never been out of Echuca and had no ideas outside the drapery business, which he hoped to inherit from her papa.

Bessie was radiating contentment, smugly proud of her new home which her father had furnished with elaborate pieces. She was with child, and her face, that used to be always animated with chatter, had often a still, listening look, while her lovely complexion bloomed. Bessie was a fruiting tree. Almost Delie envied her the ripeness of maternity.

At night she often felt feverish. Her cheeks burned with a dry flush, symptom of the disease she had, that enhanced her looks and made her eyes bluer and more brilliant.

In the mornings she would be pale and lethargic, with her dark hair spread upon the pillow still damp from the night sweats that sapped her energy. But though she often stayed in bed for breakfast, soon the longing to see Brenton, to be near him, to touch him, would become so strong that she got up and went down to the wharf.

He rarely glanced in her direction after his first greeting, but she knew he was aware of her presence as he directed the loading of farm machinery, bags of flour, piles of rabbit traps, cases of beer; himself the most active man there as he lumped bags or stacked a pile of red-gum boards for spare paddles.

She felt impelled, when he stopped for a breather, with the sweat darkening his fair curls, to stand close beside him with her arm just brushing his. With her senses roused but unsatisfied, she was intensely aware of his physical presence. She felt that the strong current of attraction that flowed between them must be visible to others, in an arc of fire between her arm and his, like the electricity which the *Gem* and the *Ellen* had to light their

cabins—"at the touch of a pretty little button, and without smoke, fuss, or smell", as a delighted passenger had written.

There was a new member of the crew already in his quarters on board. The first day Delie went down to the boat, sniffing delightedly at the old, muddy, decaying river smell, watching the ripple-reflections dance in golden light on plank and beam, she was startled by a commanding voice from the wheel-house:

"Stand at . . . HEASE! Stand from under! Some of you lubbers will be getting killed down there yet!"

She looked up, expecting to see some grizzled sea-captain, and saw instead the wise old eyes of a green parrot regarding her through the open windows of the wheel-house

"*What* did you say?" she asked politely.

"Which of you devils has had the screwdriver?" replied the parrot severely.

She went up to the wheel-house and offered to shake hands or scratch his poll, but the parrot, which had a length of light chain tied to one leg, backed away with a flow of incomprehensible language.

"He's swearing at you in Danish," Brenton called up to her. "He can swear in three languages, English, Danish and Swedish."

"But where did you get him?"

"From a Captain Jacobsen who's retiring from the river. He was a deep-sea man, and picked up Skipper in South America. He said Skipper would never be happy away from a boat, and he seemed fond of me."

"All birds seem to like you," said Delie, thinking of the parrots he had whistled up in the red-gum forest across the river, when they picnicked there on the first day of their marriage. He wanted to make love to her in New South Wales, he said, because that was his home State. He had been born in a small bush town, but had lived in both Sydney and Melbourne before he was fifteen. He had a married sister in Queensland and a brother in Sydney; both his parents were dead. His father had been a saddler.

"We never had things flash like that," he said after they'd

visited her uncle's place. "No carpets and pianos and things. We lived in the kitchen mostly, and had a parlour for visitors that was hardly ever used. But I was never in the house when I could help it, and I was always wagging it from school. That's why the city got me down—all these houses and walls. Out here, a man can breathe."

She had never seen him out of the town before, except at night when they had roamed along the river-bank with the one idea of getting away from 'people'.

Now she discovered a new side to him, the bushman and naturalist with the keen, trained eyesight of a boy born and bred in the country, and a wide knowledge of native birds. She had seen Murray magpies come down to take cheese from his fingers, and he told her about the tame Willy-Wag that used to ride on his shoulder when he was a boy.

He never used to take more than one egg from a nest, and used to fight the other boys who wanted to take the lot. He kept boxes full of eggs under his bed.

"Sometimes I'd forget to blow one, and there'd be a row from Mum when it started to pong."

Delie was filled with tenderness for that little fair-haired boy with his collection of birds' eggs. And he had a gentleness with small things, this tough bushman who could roll an unruly member of the crew on the deck with one blow of his fist.

He found wildflowers that she had not noticed, touching them delicately with his big fingers, naming them for her; he held a tiny lizard in his palm and stroked it till its alarm subsided; lifted her up to see the neat white eggs of a parrot in the hollow limb of a tree.

He told her how dangerous it was to put your arm in after parrots' eggs when on horseback; everyone knew of the man whose horse had moved away from under him, and left him hanging with his arm jammed in the tree until he died.

When children came down to the wharf, pestering to be allowed on board, Delie noticed how he handled them, firmly and gently. Children liked him too. She was reminded of a poem she had read in *The Bulletin*:

TIME, FLOW SOFTLY

And you shall speak as a man speaks,
Not mealy-mouthed or mild,
But you must go with a girl's love
For every lisping child . . .

All this erased the rather unpleasant impression made by the way he had crushed the wounded moth so deliberately with his finger, when they first had tea together.

But the pleasant companion of these bush picnics became again the busy captain, and even on Sundays she had him to herself only at night. Then, at the last drowsy moment before drifting into sleep, she felt with utter content the touch of his side, the intimacy of their feet beneath the bedclothes, annulling all the loneliness of the day.

In the afternoons she rested for two hours in bed, as the doctor had ordered. She filled her time with painting and drawing, visited Bessie, and waited, almost as impatiently as Brenton did, for the expected break in the season.

At last all was ready, and the rise that was coming down the river, its progress posted every day in the town, was due in two days' time.

The extra deck-hands and the new bargemaster were engaged, and a new fireman. He was a taciturn man with a dark, seamed face. Delie thought he looked rather frightening, but Brenton explained that the man couldn't help his appearance, he had once had hot ashes and cinders and even fragments of metal blown deep into his skin when a boiler exploded; he was lucky to have survived.

Ben came back, a little older and more assured than when she had seen him a year ago but with the same shy, dark, intelligent eyes. He helped her to hang new chintz curtains in the cabins and saloon, and was always eager to run messages for her.

Charlie the engineer was as surly and disobliging as ever; the mate, Jim Pearce, as friendly and jolly. Ah Lee came on board with a suitcase which he did not let out of his hands till he had it stowed away in some mysterious place in the galley.

There were not enough cabins for everybody. The mate and

THE CITY AND THE PLAINS

the engineer shared the cabin next to the captain's. The fireman and Ben had a small cabin aft. The other deck-hands, the barge-master of the first barge and the bargemen, with the Chinese cook, slept under a tarpaulin on the first barge.

Ah Lee, who complained of the others' snoring which kept him awake, decided to sleep in the forepeak which was used for paint and stores. But the mate, forgetting he was there, jumped down to get a piece of rope during the night. He landed right on top of Ah Lee, who was not pleased.

"Jesus blunny Cli!" he yelled. "A man no can sleepee on this blunny boa'!"

Steamers which had already been upstream for flour from Yarrawonga and Albury reported the Moira Lakes almost dry. River men were gloomy about the prospects for the year's trading, for there had been little rain in Queensland either, and the Darling was low.

"We'll leave as soon as there's enough water over the Bitch an' Pups to take us," said Brenton. "It'll be a race to get to the Darling junction before the river falls again. If we're caught we'll just have to lie up and wait for another fresh."

But when they finally got away, Delie had no idea that it would be nearly two years before she saw Echuca again.

Before they left, she had a letter from Kevin Hodge, just leaving South Africa to be repatriated. "This place will do me," he wrote. "As soon as I've seen my people I'll be coming back here to take up land, and there's a little South Africa girl who will be waiting . . ."

Delie had almost forgotten him. She was glad he no longer thought of her.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

They had passed Murrumbidgee Reef while more cautious skippers were waiting to see if the rise would hold. At Clump Bend Teddy Edwards swore for the first time, long and softly.

as he turned the big wheel rapidly, heaving down on the spokes.

His eyes never left the river, where the current slipped round a sharp S-bend with a large snag sticking up in the middle. He swung the boat straight at the snag, and it crunched harmlessly beneath the solid red-gum stem. Tangled in a paddle-wheel, it would have bent the iron frame and smashed the paddles.

"Come up, old girl; come up," he muttered, heaving the wheel in the opposite direction. "She's dropping her right shoulder," he said to the mate, who had stood by on the other side of the wheel to give an extra heave on the spokes.

"Yair," said Jim Pearce. "Some of the cargo not trimmed properly?"

"Must be. We'd better see to it at the first stop to wood-up." (Not 'You'd better see to it', or just 'See to it', Delie noticed, but 'We'd better see to it'.)

She was standing quietly in a corner of the wheelhouse, trying not to get in the way. Watching him as he looked back at the two barges negotiating the bend after him, she saw why they said, "Teddy Edwards is shaping as a good river man."

"Whee!" He let out his breath with relief as the second barge came safely round, and rubbed the back of his wrist across his sweating forehead. "She's going to be a picnic, this trip. You'll be seeing the river just about at its worst, darling."

For the first time since they had left he looked directly at her. The boat had taken all his thoughts and all his endearments so far; it had come alive under his hands, he talked to it as if it were a sentient being. But now he looked down at Delie in the old attitude she used to dislike, his head thrown back a little, his eyes half-closed, and her heart seemed to stop. She had never loved him so much.

She saw him now in his man's world, taking command so naturally, so easily, without the least arrogance or fuss. He was nearly ten years older, and in him she seemed to find her lost father, her dead cousin and husband all in one.

The fresh that had brought a rise of two feet had already passed on, and the river was falling again. The fantastic twisted roots of

trees growing in the bank showed clear of the water once more.

For Delie—setting off at last round those unknown bends, along that mysterious channel which as a child she had so longed to explore—there was something of anticlimax in the steeply-sloping banks of clay, varied with clean sandy spits of a warm yellow colour on the inside of bends. Here were the same banks, the same dark leaning trees, and behind them the endless grey forests of the flooded gums that she had known above Echuca.

The day was overcast and dull. A cool wind from their movement came in the open wheel-house, but a shaft of sunlight struck down on the sombre trees ahead, lighting their pale grey trunks, turning their leaves to olive and amber, the tiny stems to threads of scarlet silk.

Suddenly it came over Delie that she was really started on her great adventure, that she was off 'up the Darlin', away into the outback with the man she loved.

Her happiness swelled in her breast until she felt she could not contain it, she must burst like an over-charged boiler. She seized the rope that hung at the back of the wheel-house, and blew a tremendous blast on the whistle.

"Avast and belay there!" cried the parrot, startled.

The mate looked shocked, and Brenton frowned.

"Here, don't do that. The engineer will think I'm blowing off steam so as I can pull in at a woodpile, and he'll let the pressure drop. Or the bargemaster'll think it's a signal to come alongside for his lunch."

"Sorry," said Delie, blushing. But she lifted her head to hear the lovely peal, wild and free, echoing back from bends far out of sight. She nearly added, in explanation, "It was because I love you," but the mate was standing there, leaning forward through the window, looking for the mile-tree that marked their distance in river-miles from Albury.

"Is that a five?" he muttered. "Can you see a five on that big tree in the bight of the bend there, the one with the niggerhead? I'm seeing fives in every twist of bark. Three-sixty-five's the next one."

Delie leant in her corner and sang softly to herself. She was off

at last; and the whole future beckoned her from round the next bend and the next.

If the movement was only illusory; if it was the banks that moved, while she and the boat stood still on an unflowing, unreturning stream; well, it did not matter. She was content to let life flow towards her, or carry her on, whichever it might be. She stretched out her hands to draw it all to her, up to the last experience, the final great fact of death. She heard the white waves stamp upon the shore.

Near Koondrook, where big red-gum logs were piled on the banks and the redolent blood-red sawdust lay in great heaps, they sighted the smoke of the *Success* which had left just behind them. The throttle was immediately opened, wood was thrown recklessly into the furnace, and they drew away once more.

Then for seventeen miles they churned past Campbell's Island, where kangaroos and wild black pigs stared at them from the reedy grasses. The river, being halved by the island, became extremely narrow. Leaning trees swept the decks with their lower branches; leaves, twigs, and birds' nests clattered aboard.

The mate was taking his six hours off duty, so Ben came up to lend a hand on the wheel round the sharp turns. Because of the way she was loaded, the *Philadelphia* came sluggishly out of the bends, sidling round them like a befuddled crab.

Ben, thin and awkward in half-mast pants, gave the skipper's wife one scared glance from his shy, dark eyes and did not look at her again. His ears tingled when he felt her eyes, so large and soft and blue, fixed upon him. He stammered some reply to her friendly greeting, and stared straight ahead.

Brenton had entered in his log that morning:

6 a.m.: Steamer loaded with list to starboard, also three inches down by the head, a trim in which she will scarcely steer. When through Swan Hill bridge will stop to re-stow cargo.

(In spite of his experience in Williamstown harbour, he sometimes used the terms 'left' and 'right', which were understood on the river as well as more seamanlike terms; but his journal was kept like that of a seagoing craft.)

They stopped at Falkiner's Woodpile, where six-foot logs for the furnace were 'walked' on board by a chain of men standing along the gangplank. Then, while the cargo was being moved, Delie went up to a bare little wood-and-iron farmhouse back from the river bank, to ask for fresh milk.

A gaunt woman in a black dress, long apron and sun-bonnet came out, and rather grudgingly filled her billy-can with three-penn'orth of milk.

"How old are you?" she asked, looking curiously at Delie's slim figure in its pink cambric blouse and straight skirt, the waist emphasised by a wide belt; at her dark shining hair and beautiful complexion.

"Just twenty-one," said Delie.

"And how old do yer think I am?"

"Oh, I don't know . . ." Delie looked at the lined brown face and leathery hands, the stringy, mousy hair straggling from under the bonnet, the mouth with a missing front tooth. She looked away again, embarrassed.

"I'm twenty-five," said the woman, with a bitter smile. "Yes, just four years older'n you. Wouldn't think it, would yer? But I've 'ad a hard life, yer see. 'Ad to slave amongst cows since I were about ten year old; 'ad to milk before I went to school, an' milk again at night when I were too tired almost to sit up . . . I hate cows."

Three frowzle-haired, wiry children, all under five or so years, pushed round her skirts and peeped doubtfully at the stranger. "Why did you marry a farmer, then?" Delie was on the point of asking. But she realised that for this woman there could have been no escape. She would meet no one but cocky-farmers; she'd had no chance to educate herself for anything except marriage. Her life would be bounded by cows until she died.

"Sometimes I've cried with fright, getting the cows in from them swamps. Crawl'n' with tiger-snakes, they are. And the river's that dangerous about 'ere, I don't expect the kids will live to grow up. We'll never get away," said the woman, with a kind of pride of hopelessness.

Delie felt terribly guilty when she thought of the easy, interest-

ing life she led; her own smooth hands and unblemished complexion made her feel ashamed.

With some obscure idea of consoling the other with her misfortune, she blurted out: "I—I'm ill, you know. I have to rest a lot and I can't do much. But this climate is supposed to be very good for T.B. The doctor said——"

The woman drew back as though a palpable cloud of germs had issued from Delie's mouth.

"Get back! Get up to the 'ouse!" she cried angrily to the children, shooing them away. "Keep away, I tell yer. Come away when you're told," she cried, angrily grabbing the youngest who was toddling towards the visitor, blowing bubbles from her sticky lips.

There was such disgust in her voice that Delie was stung. "It isn't leprosy I've got, or the plague," she called after their retreating backs. But she was shaken. What if Brenton had felt like that about the disease?

The *Success* should have caught them up while they were stopped, but there was no sign of her or even of her smoke in the distance. It was not until much later that they learned how her barge had been snagged and sunk above Campbell's Island, and her crew had taken days to rescue the cargo and refloat the barge.

Below Swan Hill the character of the river had changed. From a mysterious stream flowing between uncharted forests where strange birds called, it had become an open river winding between flat, grassy plains, with farmhouses and patches of irrigated orchard on the banks.

Delie travelled most of the way in the wheel-house, finding it all fascinating. Brenton, who was supposed to hate every other other six hours off duty, scarcely left the wheel-house and even had his meals brought up to him there.

She learned a great deal of river lore by listening to the laconic phrases dropped by skipper and mate.

Every bend, almost every tree, seemed to have its own story of collision, fire, snagging or sinking, races between rival skippers and remarkable tows.

It amazed her that Brenton always knew where he was, with-

out referring to the long, linen chart wound on rollers that was kept in the cabin. He had every bend, bight and reef photographed in his mind, and before a punt-crossing had come in sight, would give a blast on the whistle to warn the punt-man to drop the cable to the bottom of the river.

They had passed Tooley Buc and the experimental pumping station at Goodnight, and other places whose names made a weird music in Delie's mind: Black Stump, Wood Wood, Gallows Bend, Tyntynder, Pyangil.

Then Teddy Edwards pushed the throttle in the wheel-house to dead slow, and, holding the wheel steady, rested his chin meditatively on his brown forearm.

"What is it?" she asked, seeing nothing but an innocent bend of river ahead.

"The Bitch and Pups. Round the next bend. Can't you hear the roar?"

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Ahead lay the large island and several small boulders, the Bitch and her snarling Pups, that barred all but a narrow, dangerous channel: the place that all river-men liked to have behind them on a low river. At the shallowest place the water foamed and swirled like a mill-race, only three feet deep, over a bar of rock.

"We're drawing just two feet six, so that's all right," said the skipper calmly. He blew a long blast on the whistle and swung the wheel to starboard, bringing the *Philadelphia* round in a slow sweep until she faced against the current, the two barges following until the whole convoy faced upstream.

Now they proceeded to drop the barges through the dangerous passage, by tying up the steamer and letting each barge drift slowly downstream, paying out the tow-rope as they went. Deckhands stood ready with poles to push off from the hard clay and rocks of the islands; even the fireman and the cook stood ready to help.

When the barges were safely tied up below, Brenton began to drop the steamer through without using a rope. With the paddles just turning ahead, he let the current take her slowly backwards. All hands watched anxiously as she was dragged a little sideways by the current, dropping towards the narrow race that seemed scarcely wide enough to take her.

Just then a gust of wind sprang up, caught the high superstructure, and swung her out of position. Brenton moved the throttle to Full Ahead and the boat shuddered as paddles bit into the water and took her upstre'am again out of danger.

He appeared cool as a cucumber; he might have been cruising somewhere in the middle of a big lake.

A second time they dropped down, inch by inch, and a second time the wind caught them. This time the port paddle-box scraped one of the Pups as they went forward. The third time they edged back into the channel, like a hermit crab with a tender behind feeling its way into a shell, the racing current took them through without damage except for a piece of wood knocked off the paddle-housing.

The *Philadelphia* turned downstream again, with her two barges attached, at her full speed of eight knots increased by the current to twelve. They all felt a slackening of the tension with that hazard behind. There was nothing to worry about now before Jeremiah Lump and the Boundary Rocks, above Euston.

Brenton took out a handkerchief and wiped his sweating palms, the only outward sign of the strain he had been under.

The banks became closely timbered again; then the Wakool came in sharply on the right, and the river widened out. Delie refused to go into the cabin for her rest, because they were soon to pass the Murrumbidgee junction. The banks were higher here, with ridges of red sand topped by dark Murray pines.

Clouds came up and the wind blew cold. Brenton shut the windows, so that it was snug and companionable inside the wheel-house. He pointed out to her the nankeen herons flying out of the trees just ahead of the boat, the light shining through their coppery wings.

"See them birds?" he said. "There's one in a tree quite close,

see? See his blue crest? And the long white plumes at the back? They're night-herons really, they only feed at night, but the boat flushes 'em out of the trees."

"Where, where?" she cried, unable to see. She was used by now to his occasional slips in grammar when he was excited, and scarcely noticed them.

He left the wheel and walked over to her, turning her head between his two hands until she was looking in the right direction. But she did not see the birds; she closed her eyes and leant against his hands, marvelling again at the magic of their touch.

A pair of black swans, after much beating of their white-tipped wings, took off and sped down the reach. A kookaburra flew silently across the river.

"Those damn' birds," said the mate meditatively. "Whenever I see them, or hear 'em in the mornings and at sunset, I remember how they laughed at me when I first come to Australia."

"They frightened me the first time I heard them," said Delie.

"Well, you know what I was when I first arrived; a real Pommy, dark blue suit, tweed cap, black shoes, and all. I deserted off a merchantman at Port Adelaide, got a lift to Murray Bridge, and set off to walk to Morgan, where they said there was plenty of steamers and I could get a berth.

"I walked through the bush, following more or less the line of the river. Hot! I've never bin so hot. I took off me coat and tied it round me neck; I took off me waistcoat and chucked it away. I was dead scared of snakes, and lots of times I had to cut across dry swamps full of reeds . . .

"And whenever I got into the shade of some big tree, those damn' birds'd start laughing at me. Mocking. You never heard such heartless laughter. 'What a bee of a country,' I thought. 'I'll never set foot on it again' (me feet was blistered by this time). And I never did, neither, except to cross the road from a steamer to a pub."

"But you like the river, even if you don't like the country?"

"Don't like the country? Who says I don't like it? I wouldn't live nowhere else, certainly not back in damp old England. She's

a beaut country, and a bonzer river, and no one better call *me* a Pommy."

"Same here," said Delie enthusiastically.

"There's the 'Bidgee coming in," said Brenton casually.

"Where? Where?" she flew across the wheel-house, and pressed her nose to the glass on the starboard side.

"All right, it won't fly away."

"Is *that* it?" She was disappointed; the Murrumbidgee, which brought the snow⁷waters down from Kiandra where she had lived as a child, which was a 'navigable river for half its length, came into the Murray as tamely as any small creek. But below the junction the main stream widened; it was now a river of noble proportions, but still very circuitous. They were coming to a cutting, where the main stream had cut through a narrow neck of land, leaving a six-mile bend to silt up gradually until it should become a billabong, no longer connected with the river. Through the narrow cutting, which was only a hundred yards long, the current raced. There was quick consultation between skipper and mate.

"I think I'll take her through, Jim."

"I dunno, Teddy. The current's pretty stiff."

"The old channel's silting up, though, and there's not much water. Yes, I'll take her through."

There was a tap on the wheel-house door, and Ben put his head in, about level with their knees as he stood on the bottom step.

"Message from the engineer, Skipper. He says if you're going through Wilson's cutting you'd better take her dead slow."

Teddy Edwards put his head back and looked down at Ben through half-closed blue eyes. He leant comfortably on the wheel, holding it in position with the weight of his big frame.

"Oh, he does, does he? You just wait here a while, my lad."

He left the wheel a moment, stepped down to the deck and walked over to the side. He stood with both hands' on the rail looking down towards the cutting, estimating the speed of the current. Then he stepped back, took the wheel, and set his jaw hard.

In a moment they were racing in the grip of the current. There

was a shout of alarm from the barge behind, and steamer and barges rushed through, dragged sideways against one bank until the port wheel was churning up reeds and mud. The skipper looked back as the last barge hit the bank and cannoned off safely.

"Now Ben, my boy," he said, "you can go down and tell that interfering blanky engineer that I took her through full steam ahead."

"Y-yes, sir." He disappeared, still pop-eyed.

"We saved about six mile there," said Brehton.

"And might have lost six hundred pounds' worth of cargo and barge," said the mate darkly.

But the skipper only smiled, a small self-satisfied smile.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Below the Devil's Racecourse, the *Philadelphia* was held up for repairs. One paddle-wheel had been dismantled and its iron frame straightened, and two split paddles had been replaced.

Teddy Edwards, turned carpenter, was on the bank planing a young tree to replace a smashed deck-stanchion. He was an expert axeman, and had felled the tree with a few well-aimed blows.

The parrot hopped out of the wheel-house, flew on to Delie's shoulder where she was leaning on the rail of the top deck to watch, and looked down at the carpentering with knowing eyes.

"Which of you devils has had the screwdriver?" he asked sternly.

As the mate came up on the way to his cabin, Delie stopped him. "Jim," she said in a low voice, "I heard you advise the skipper to warp over that bad reef back there—what is it, Macfarlane's Reef?—and to drop through at the Racecourse. Isn't he being a bit foolhardy? It almost seems as if he goes directly against advice."

"Ah, Miss Philadelphia, a man can only learn through experi-

ence. Us older chaps can't teach him. He'll be a good river-man, but he's young yet. He'll learn what can and what can't be done with two barges, on this trip."

At MacFarlane's Reef they had scraped and bumped, but got across safely; at the Racecourse, when Brenton slowed down and prepared to take the rapids bows first, the treacherous cross-wind, that had been blowing in gusts all day, caught them side-on. The *Philadelphia* had sailed like a great paper boat diagonally across the river, to crash into the overhanging trees and the bank of the New South Wales side. The paddle-housing crumpled like paper, deck stanchions were smashed, a long bough poked through the fly-netting window of the galley, narrowly missing Ah Lee ("Jesus blunny Cli! Tlees knock po's off of stove now!" he yelled); and there they were impaled like a bird on a thorn.

The following barges, with less wind resistance, could yet do nothing to stop themselves. The bargemen could only try to steer clear of each other and the disabled steamer, as the current caught them and swirled them down past her. The first barge brought up with a jerk at the end of its rope that almost pulled the towing-pole out; the second went aground with such a list that half the cargo was lost, and bales of hay went floating down the river. Some of these were salvaged and spread on the bank to dry, but many were gone. Meanwhile everyone shouted advice, swear-words and instructions, even the parrot joining in from the wheel-house in Danish.

The whole crew, even those who were off duty, had turned out to get the *Philadelphia* steaming down-river again. They all knew the need for haste; they had ventured out on a river yet dangerously low to beat the other steamers to the Darling and the backloading of wool, for it was a case of first come first served at the station landings. Brenton worked harder than any of them, cutting trees, taking a line across the river from the winch to warp off steamer and barge.

Just before the repairs were completed, the engineer came up on the top deck, wiping his fingers on his greasy cap. He gave Delie a surly nod and then lifted his nose into the wind, sniffing like a dog.

"Thought I smelled smoke," he said. "C'n you see anything?"

He shaded his eyes and gazed towards the east. In this part the Murray makes a ninety-mile bend to the southward below Euston, and returns upon itself towards Mildura. Far across this wide neck of land appeared a faint smudge of smoke, extending in a trail along the skyline, as though a train had just passed. But it was not a train.

"Hell!" said Charlie loudly. "The *Pride of the Murray* is on our tail."

"You mean you know which steamer it is by the smoke?"

"I know by the way the smoke is spread out, an' the colour," said Charlie without the flicker of an eyelash.

Delie marvelled, not knowing that Charlie had seen the *Pride of the Murray's* engineer just before they left, and knew that she was nearly ready to leave and would do her best to race them to Wentworth and the Darling junction. She was a stern-wheeler, a faster but a bigger boat, so that she would have more trouble over the bars and rapids than the little *Philadelphia*, unless she was travelling behind a fresh.

Charlie had run down the steps over the paddle-box to the skipper, and Delie saw Brenton look briefly over his shoulder to the eastward, before raising the completed stanchion into place. Within half an hour the *Philadelphia* was under steam again, churning downriver with dark smoke curling from her funnel.

Delie thought there was a new note in the engine; the effortless churning along with the current had changed to a more urgent *chuff-chuff-chuff-chuff*, the paddles went *clunk-clunk-clunk* in a faster rhythm, and the whole boat began to tremble and shudder with effort.

She put Skipper back on his perch and went down to the bottom deck, in behind the great pile of flour-bags that darkened the opening to the boiler and engine between the paddle-boxes, bathrooms and galley. She saw the dark-faced fireman knock open the furnace door and fling another length of box into the fire. Charlie was standing with a bit of rag in his hand, looking at the pressure-gauge with satisfaction.

She knew she was not welcome, but she went up and looked at

the gauge. It showed nearly 80 lb. pressure. A large brick and a heavy spanner hung from the safety valve by a piece of wire.

Charlie looked at her with a fanatical gleam in his blue eyes beneath his wild, fierce-looking eyebrows.

"It ain't no use pokin' yer nose in 'ere," he said. "I know what I'm a-doin'. I've 'ad eighty-two on that there gauge and she never turned a hair. Them manufacturers is cautious blokes."

"Never turned a hair! Listen to her! She sounds as if she's tearing herself to pieces."

Charlie listened to the frantic sob of the funnel with what was almost a smile on his weather-beaten face.

"She knows! She knows the *Pride of the Murray* is after 'er. If I give 'er 'er head now we'll be at Wentworth first, you'll see."

Delie marched up to the wheel-house and tackled Brenton.

"It's not safe! That mad engineer will blow us all up."

"Nonsense, little 'un. I'd trust Charlie with any engine when he's sober."

"Oh, you men! You're all the same."

They travelled all night, with the two acetylene lamps with their big reflectors lighting up the bends ahead, making the trees gleam with a gem-like brilliance against the sky, startling the plover and the roosting cockatoos. But in the dawn, when the river reflected the trees as in a steel mirror, a dark streamer of smoke still showed to the south-east, much closer than it had been the day before.

They stopped briefly at Mildura irrigation settlement, while Brenton went up to the post office to learn the latest reports on river levels in the Darling. Delie, who often felt a deadly lassitude in the mornings, lay on top of her bunk in her dressing-gown, summoning her strength for the effort of getting up. Through the cabin door she watched the remarkable red cliffs, the green vineyards and the glowing orange sandhills swim past.

At last the colour of a green willow against an ochreous sand-hill, all reflected in almond-green water, stabbed her into activity. She dressed quickly, hoping they might stop again somewhere. But she managed only a quick water-colour sketch of some pink

and yellow cliffs, for they did not stop; the little *Philadelphia* ploughed gallantly on her way, always with that menace of following smoke nearer in the pure, pale sky.

"We'll lick the *Pride* to Wentworth," said Brenton with satisfaction as she joined him in the wheel-house. She gazed at his strong profile, the short, straight, determined nose and firm chin. He did not look tired in spite of sleepless nights and long hours at the wheel. A boundless vitality flowed from him, and seemed to be imparted to the eager, throbbing vessel through his hands.

When they came in sight of the Darling junction the *Pride* was only a few bends behind. They could see the other river for some time through the trees; then they rounded a long sand-spit and turned into the Darling, into the milky, muddy waters of the tributary. The sloping Wentworth wharf stood well out of the water, and alongside were several 'bottom-end' boats—*Fairy*, *Pyap*, *Renmark* and *Queen*—unloading stores, while the *South Australian*, the 'flyer' of the lower river, was just casting off.

The lift-bridge was open, and with a loud whistle the *Philadelphia* steamed through without slackening speed.

"Hell!" said Charlie, who had come out to watch Wentworth go by. "The *South Australian's* after us now. Two barges, but the current doesn't worry her none; we're sunk for sure."

"Don't use that word, Charlie," admonished the fireman.

"What word? I never swore."

"'Sunk', I mean. It's bad luck."

"Tchah!" said Charlie, polishing his nose rapidly with the back of his hand. "You'll hear some words if she goes past us. Jump to it, now! Pour some kerosene on that there wood."

He dived into the space between the paddle-boxes, while the fireman knocked open the firebox door and slung in his choicest, driest logs. He had used all the kerosene there was to spare in beating the *Pride* to Wentworth.

They struggled upstream against the current. But the faster *South Australian* drew nearer, drew abreast—and then, with a derisive whistle and shouted jibes from her crew, she forged past and left the *Philadelphia* her wake.

On the bottom deck Charlie McBean danced up and down on

his cap, shouting at the rival engineer: "Yah! We could steam all round ye goin' downstream!" In his excitement he kicked at an empty bucket, as he thought; but 'the silly bucket on the deck' happened to be full of nuts and bolts the fireman had been sorting out, and it hurt his toe. A flood of lurid language accompanied the trail of smoke and sparks from the funnel as they streamed out behind.

When Delie took his lunch up to him, Brenton scowled and refused to eat anything, though he swallowed a mug-full of hot tea at one gulp. He hated anything to pass him. She thought he was being rather childish in refusing to eat, but she said nothing.

Now that no steamer was in sight behind them, Brenton reduced speed a little and jumped in for a swim while they were going along.

Though the nights and mornings were bitterly cold, the inland sun blazed down from a blue sky all day long. The water, coming over a thousand miles of sun-scorched plains, was always warm. He would hand over the wheel, take off his shirt and shoes—if he had any on, for he liked to go barefoot on the boat—and dive overboard. In a few moments he was on deck again, having climbed up over the rudder.

The men on the barges behind enjoyed this spectacle, especially when he did his famous trick of diving beneath a paddle-wheel.

Delie saw this terrifying performance for the first time when she had just been down to the port paddle-box for some butter which was hung there for coolness. She paused to watch the fourteen-foot wheel threshing round in its blind power.

Fascinated, she watched it hitting the water with a series of solid blows, and felt the cool mist of spray drift over her face. The wheel did not go very deep, but the wooden paddles were set at an angle to give the maximum forward thrust.

She went to the galley to butter some biscuits for Brenton's afternoon tea, arranging cheese and gherkin on them in dainty patterns. But when she came out with the plate in her hand, there was Brenton, in nothing but a pair of dungarees, standing on the edge of the deck and looking down at the milky water.

THE CITY AND THE PLAINS

"Just going in for a dip," he said, and dived straight in front of the churning wheel. Her mouth was still open to scream a protest when he came up in the wake. He swam diagonally to the bank, ran along its steep, mud-ringed side until he was ahead, and swam out again to the steamer.

"It's terribly dangerous!" she cried, clutching him as he came back along the deck, regardless of his dripping wet condition. "Don't do it again, Brenton! Please!"

But he only smiled, his eyes very clear and blue-green in his brown face, and told her not to fuss.

"I've done it a hundred times. The 'River Murray Spaniel' they call me. It's simple enough to dive under the paddles, specially going upstream."

"I still wish you wouldn't."

But she knew that he would, all the same.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Delie hated the Darling River for the rest of her life. From the time they entered that muddy stream everything seemed to go wrong. Between the close confining banks of grey mud nothing could be seen but the stretch of cloudy water ahead, and the stretch behind; the sky above, and on top of the high banks a procession of blue-grey box-trees with trunks like dark, twisted iron.

"It's just like a ditch!" she cried. "A great, muddy ditch full of drain-water."

"Ah, you haven't seen the Darling in a good season, when the banks are brim-full or overflowing. Why, once Captain Randell picked up wool twenty miles from the main channel. You can see for miles and miles then, across the blacksoil plains," said Brenton, "and the only way you can get wood is to take the dinghy and cut it off the high land. Even where there's no water, the mirage glistens along the horizon with reflections in it like a lake.

"It's a tremendous country out here. Not like that little green cabbage-patch of a Victoria."

"I prefer the Murray," she said obstinately. "There's nothing to paint here; no distance, no colour. It's all grey and brown."

She hated the feeling of being shut in; it was like travelling through a railway cutting hundreds of miles long.

At the small settlement of Menindie, a galvanised-iron town of one pub and many goats, they unloaded beer and flour, and then hurried on; the river was low, but the seasonal rains from Queensland had already come down, and it was not likely to get any higher.

The first misfortune overtook them below Wilcannia, at four in the morning. Smoke was seen issuing from the forepeak as they travelled along, and the steamer was hastily brought into the bank. There was a fire in the dangerous cargo forward. The crew, helped by the barge-hands, made a line with buckets of water. Then a case of gunpowder exploded, and cartridges began going off in all directions, luckily without injuring anyone.

Ben helped Delie ashore before this happened. The cook followed, apparently filled with Oriental calm, lugging his portmanteau from the galley. Just then there was a second explosion, which fortunately blew the fire into the river; but several bags of flour that had been stowed on top went up as well, and flour fell like snow from the sky. An empty jam-case that had been lying on top of all seemed to take an enormous time to come down, and when it did it missed Ah Lee's head by about six inches.

Oriental calm evaporated. "My Cli'!" he yelled, and went off like an arrow, but not forgetting the portmanteau. In the dark he ran across the narrow neck of land between the river and a creek, and in he went.

Delie was meanwhile attending to burns and binding up wounds caused by falling debris. It was not until half an hour later that someone thought of the cook. After a search he was found in the creek, hanging on to a snag with his head just above water. When fished out he was still clinging firmly to the portmanteau, and though shaking all over with cold would not let it out of his con-

vulsive grasp. He was given a hot drink and persuaded that the danger was over and hustled off to bed, still trying vainly to explain what had happened through wildly chattering teeth.

There was surprisingly little damage, except for a charred hole in the foredeck. It was found that mice nesting in a box of wax matches had set off the fire. Brenton also found that a cask of beer, destined for Louth, had been 'accidentally' broached in the excitement, but he turned a blind eye. Most crews were always thirsty, and would provide themselves with a gimlet and a few straws with which to sample a liquid cargo.

While the mate took over the wheel in a clear stretch of river next day (for the skipper would not sleep while they were travelling by night, even though it was safer going upstream than down), Brenton came to the cabin to snatch a few hours' sleep.

Delie drew the two little curtains at the cabin windows and prepared to leave him, sprawled hugely on her bunk, for he seemed too tired to climb to his. But as she drew the cover over him one of the limp hands hanging over the edge took her wrist in a grip of steel.

"Don't go yet. I never see you alone now."

"But you want to rest."

"Who says I want to rest? I want *you*."

"But I thought you were tired."

"I am; but not too tired."

She sighed, but came to him happily. Each time she felt it to be a re-avowal of his love and his need for her; though she had not yet learned to respond fully to his love-making, which was almost brutally ruthless and direct, she knew the contentment of giving herself and feeling his pleasure in her. Reason told her that he could have found it, had found it often in the past, with other women, perhaps any woman would suffice; but her unreasonable feminine heart construed it always as an act of love.

The mate tied up and did not try to negotiate the Christmas Rocks alone. He called the skipper, and Brenton looked worried at the lack of water over these two ledges of rock running almost

across the river. If it was like this so early in the season, what would it be like when the river began to fall? There was danger of being bottled up there for the rest of the year in some water-hole.

Just below Wilcannia they were overhauled by the *Waradgery*, a stern-wheeler from Echuca, but there were none of the usual jeers and cat-calls from the passing crew; only a serious, quiet salute which puzzled the *Philadelphia's* men. But when they tied up beside the *Waradgery* and the *Pride of the Murray* they learned the reason.

"The *Providence* just blew up, below Kinchega," said Captain Ritchie of the *Waradgery* to Brenton as he came aboard, accompanied by Delie. She gripped his arm as he stared back at the other captain.

"Anyone . . . killed?"

"Everyone aboard her. No one escaped but the man on the barge behind. He said she just blew to pieces. Nothing was left."

"The baby!" said Delie, white-faced.

"George Blakeney!" said Brenton. "Poor old George."

"It's just as well the whole family's gone, if you ask me," said Captain Ritchie. "It'd be awful to be the only one left."

The news threw a gloom over the whole port, where paddle-steamer crews made up most of the floating population, with drovers, bullockies, opal prospectors, shearers and station hands in for a 'bust'.

The town was an attractive place, Delie thought, a real Western town with lanky, casually-dressed horsemen on the street corners, store windows full of saddles, boots, hobblers, and Condamine bells; with its one church and thirteen hotels, big stone jail and court-house, and wide streets shaded with green pepper trees, it seemed like a metropolis after the few iron shacks and sandhills of Poincarrie and Menindie.

Delie went shopping for things she had forgotten, while beer and chaff were being unloaded from the boat, and a new load of beer was being taken on via the crew's thirsty throats. Brenton was anxious to get away before the men became drunk and

quarrelsome, when a brawl with men from one of the 'bottom-end' boats would be inevitable; for there was deadly rivalry between 'top' and 'bottom-end' men. The *Pride of the Murray*, now that they were in hostile waters where enemy South Australian boats could be met, became an ally instead of a rival.

Brenton had sold the chaff he had bought for five shillings a bag in Swan Hill, for one pound a bag in Wilcannia. The upper Darling was in the grip of a drought, and fantastic prices were being paid for fodder to keep starving stock alive. He had topped-up the barges, not fully loaded before, with 1,000 bags of chaff, and these now brought him in nearly £750 profit, which more than made up for the fire damage, and the loss from the grounded barge.

When it was time to leave, Charlie the engineer was missing. Brenton finally ran him to earth in a semi-conscious state after he had searched eight hotels, and 'walked' him back to the boat; alternately singing and protesting that his tremendous thirst was not yet slaked.

At the wharf, he refused to walk across the gangplank. He flopped to his knees and crawled aboard, muttering that "a little onion sangwidch woulden do ush any harm". The fireman had got steam up and Brenton took the *Philadelphia* a few miles upstream and stopped there, on the far side from the town, while the engineer and several other members of the crew sobered up a bit.

Then the steamer sidled out from the bank and hurried off upstream in the face of sand-bars, islands, rocky bars across the river, snags and sharp bends.

The fireman, at the beginning of his six-hour spell when the deck-hand took over, brought out a pea-rifle and began potting at ducks from the top of the flour-bags piled in the bows. Teddy Edwards leaned out through the wheel-house window.

"Don't you go shooting at any wood-ducks," he said warningly. A pair of tame-looking grey-and-white ducks sat quietly on the bank just ahead.

"Ar, can't a bloke have a pot at anythink?" growled the fireman.

"Not at wood-ducks. How would you pick them up if you winged 'em? It's not as if they was in the water."

The fireman contented himself with firing harmlessly at two wedge-tailed eagles that soared and circled high in the blue, so high that they looked like black cinders rising above a fire. He was a dark, saturnine man with a jeering voice, and Delie could not get used to his ugly, pitted skin.

He hated Chinamen, and gave the cook no peace. "Yellow scum!" he would mutter audibly as the cook came out of the galley to empty a pot overboard. "This soup smells of the dirty Chink that made it," he would say at meals.

The cook appeared impassive, but sometimes he was seen looking at Steve with a fierce gleam in his slits of eyes. One day the fireman went too far. He had just been wiping the engine for Charlie, and came aft with a piece of filthy, oily cotton rag in his hand. The cook had just put his head out of the galley, and was squinting up at the sun to gauge the time. Steve took deliberate aim and caught Ah Lee on the side of the cheek with the oozing rag.

The cook clawed it off, then reached behind him into the galley and brandished the mallet he used for pounding tough meat.

"Yah! Come outside and put yer fists up!" jeered Steve. "Yellow skin, yellow all through."

"By Cli'!" yelled Ah Lee, beside himself. "I come outsi' all li'! Outsi', insi', any blunny si', I hit 'ou in 'ou mou' an knock 'ou blunny tee' ou'!"

He rushed at the fireman, with such a murderous air that Steve decided on discretion and disappeared into the lavatory under the paddle-box until Ah Lee had cooled down a bit.

The sky was the same unbroken blue day after day, and the sun shone brilliantly in the clear dry air. Delie's chest was improved already; she slept better, and rarely became breathless. One afternoon they came to a piece of the 'high' land along the Darling, perhaps fifty feet higher than the usual flat clay plain, where the red sand of the old inland sea had not been covered by layers of black Darling silt.

The red sand, which had absorbed the sun all day, gave off heat like an oven. A few thin trees with limp, drooping leaves stood beside a solitary iron shack. Away on the horizon a low line of indigo, which was a belt of trees, wavered above the shimmer of mirage.

"We can get fresh goats' milk here," said Brenton, blowing the whistle and pulling into the right-hand bank. "Also I could do with a drink meself."

He had been morose and silent since hearing the news of the *Providence's* end. Delie noticed that the weights had been removed from the safety-valve and the *Philadelphia* was allowed to proceed at her own pace; but she said nothing.

When a rope had been taken out to a tree fore and aft, and the gangplank laid across to the steep water-ringed bank, she prepared to step ashore with him, for she wanted to see everything.

"You don't want to come, do you?" said Brenton.

At once she felt that he did not want her to come, and said obstinately, "Certainly I do. I'm tired of seeing nothing but banks of grey mud."

It was a steep climb to the top, and Jim the mate and Brenton both helped her. An ugly, witch-like old woman and a bold-faced, dirty, handsome young one emerged from the shanty door as they came up, followed at a distance by some of the crew. Delie carried a billy-can for the milk.

She felt uncomfortable at the stares of the two women, who were taking in every detail of her dress and appearance. They greeted the captain and mate with warm, avaricious smiles.

"Are you gennlemen coming in for a drink?" said the old beldame. "I've got some nice cool lemonade and orange squash inside," with a hideous wink below her shaggy grey eyebrows, "and roast duck or roast mutton with vegies."

"Roast cockatoo and roast goat, you mean," said Brenton coolly. "I'll come in and try your 'orange squash' though. The lady would like some goats' milk to take back to the boat."

"Lily, fetch some milk," said the old woman, snatching the billy and handing it over. But the bold-faced, black-haired girl stood still, swinging the billy provocatively round her hips.

"You won't be tying up for the night this time, Captain, I suppose?" She flashed a dark look at Delie.

"I will not," said Brenton. "We're racing a low river and have half the bottom-end fleet on our tail." He scowled at the girl and pushed past her.

She did not move aside for him, but stood her ground, swaying forward a little so that her almost bare breast brushed his arm. All the time she stared mockingly at Delie with her black eyes. It was the old woman who took the billy-can and came back with the milk. Delie snatched it from her with a mumbled word of thanks and fled back to the boat, over the burning red sand, through the thin patches of shade cast by the scanty belars.

"That awful woman, how could he?" she was thinking. She had accepted the fact that there had been others like Nesta; but never others like this! She would never understand men, never.

When he came aboard after dark, rather noisy and smelling of whisky, she was already in her bunk, and pretended to be asleep.

CHAPTER TWENTY

At Tilpa there was a licensed hotel, though the quality of the liquor was little better than at the riverside shanties, with their sly-grog disguised as 'orange squash'.

The hotel-keeper had a large lead-lined coffin on the counter which he kept full of rum, ladling it out at threepence a nobbler. He liked to have it ready, he said, in case he should 'pop off sudden'; and he thought the fact of its having been used as a container for spirits would help to preserve him when he was buried in it.

On all sides were the same flat, barren surroundings, the same grey soil alternating with red sand, the same shimmering mirage in the indigo distance, dry roly-poly and steel-blue trees in the foreground. The primary colours of red, blue and yellow, bleached and softened by the heat, were here muted to the ghosts of themselves. Delie was reminded of a piece of potch opal she

had once seen, with the colours barely showing in the milky stone.

They unloaded the beer, and received the disquieting news that there was no more water coming down the river. It was doubtful if any steamers would get through to Bourke, or even as far as Louth. A sudden fall of a foot or eighteen inches could trap them above the Yanda Rocks until next season. The *Pride* and the *Waradgery* were not going above Wilcannia; but the *Philadelphia* had a load of flour, rabbit-traps and ammunition to deliver at Dunlop Station.

Brenton expected to get a valuable back-loading of wool, as shearing would be over when they got there. Rather than sell his cargo at a loss and return to take his chance with the other steamers over a wool-loading from Tolarno and other lower Darling stations, he pushed on, travelling night and day. And the river had begun to fall.

It was an anxious time, and tempers became short. When the bargemaster of the leading barge fell asleep (having been on duty twelve hours instead of the usual six) and let the barge hit the bank where it stuck fast in the mud, there was much angry shouting and slandering of ancestors. However, as the barge was not heavily loaded it was winched off successfully.

But before they got to Dunlop disaster overtook them. Teddy Edwards had gambled with the river levels, and lost. The river fell a foot overnight, and another six inches the next day. Their retreat was cut off; and soon it became impossible to go forward.

Just below the little shanty at Winwar, they scraped over a bar into a fairly deep water-hole about a quarter of a mile long, with an impassable bar of rock above; and there, in this natural dam, they were forced to stay. Tarpaulins were stretched on each side to shield the decks and paintwork from the inland sun. The crew were put on half pay, and set to painting and cleaning to give them something to do.

Charlie overhauled and polished the engine; Teddy filled in his log, though there was nothing to record, and began inking-in a faded and much-altered chart; Ben read all of Delie's books; and Delie painted, in the early morning and at sunset, when the colour that was lacking in the landscape during the day

tinted the clear skies and calm water with hues of opal and of rose.

The landscape above the high banks of the river frightened her; it was so empty. Not just that there was nothing to be seen but a vast grey plain dotted with saltbush, and an indigo mirage on the horizon; but it conveyed such a feeling of stillness, dryness and immensity, so that you felt the desolate wastes stretching away out of sight.

She was happy there at first. It was calm and peaceful, she saw more of Brenton, and the landscape would, at least stand still while she painted it. Yet she missed the strange sensation of peace that came to her always with the steady onward movement of the boat. She felt this only when her body was being moved through space by some external agency, and most particularly on the river. It was as though in that endless flow, the backward flow of trees and banks and water, some inner restlessness was annulled; or as though only in movement could she feel in harmony with the progression of time, the revolution of the earth, and the endless cycle of the stars.

But as the water ceased to flow, and became stagnant; as the steep mud banks dried out, their lower levels swarming with hopping, crawling vermin; and in the airless channel between the banks the boat sweltered in the heat, while a smell of decay rose from exposed logs and dying fish, she grew almost as discontented as the men. They had begun to mutter that the skipper should never have ventured so far on a falling river in a bad season. Become wise after the event, they said they 'knew' it would lead to this—though none had said so before. Tempers became short, and arguments were frequent.

Teddy Edwards had two alternatives: to hang on to his stores, and his crew, in the hope of a fall of rain in Queensland that would bring a substantial fresh down the river and allow them to proceed up to Dunlop and back to Wentworth; or to cut his losses, pay off all but a skeleton crew, and send a message for bullock teams to come from Bourke and lift his stores at exorbitant rates.

The sky remained a pure, deep blue. The idea of rain, even

away in Queensland, seemed preposterous, but he still hung on. Solid white clouds, piled round the horizon like marble palaces, came sailing slowly across from the dry west, casting a temporary shadow so dense that it seemed to have weight. Far up in the burning blue there was always a pair of wedge-tailed eagles, endlessly circling as they rose.

One day a flock of pelicans came winging down the river with majestic, measured flight. The backwaters were drying up, and they were making for the more permanent waters of the Anabranch and the Murray. Brenton stared at them sombrely. They were not trapped in a drying puddle; they had wings and could escape.

He whirled round as the sound of a shot came from up'ard. The fireman, his dark face creased with disgust, took aim again, just as Brenton strode up and knocked the gun-barrel aside.

"I've told you not to shoot at pelicans," he said furiously.

"Ar, y' can't shoot at anythink on this ruddy tub. First it's wood-ducks, then it's pelicans. Who d'yer think you are? Mother Carey?" and he raised the gun again, though the birds were almost beyond range.

In a moment the rifle clattered to the deck, knocked out of his hands by Brenton. Steve snarled and put up his fists. With one quick blow Brenton laid him on the deck beside the rifle.

The fireman got up surlily, rubbing his jaw, but did not attempt to touch the gun again. Brenton stood it against the paddle-box and marched off to his cabin. Steve, his dignity hurt, saw the cook leering at him from the galley door.

"Don't you grin at me, you yellow Chinese scum!" he snarled, "or I'll wipe the deck with your nose."

Ah Lee continued to grin, unperturbed. Steve gathered the spittle in his mouth and spat, accurately though at long range, so that the gob landed on the cook's arm. Ah Lee's grin disappeared. He rushed to the paddle-box, snatched up the rifle, whirled on the fireman and shot him through the chest.

At the report Brenton came striding out of his cabin with a black brow, thinking that Steve was shooting at pelicans again; but he stopped short, his hands on the rail of the upper deck, and

looked down at the fireman's inert form, from under which blood was oozing.

He ran down the steps and turned the man over, felt his pulse, listened for a heart-beat. The fireman was dead. At first he thought Steve, overcome by chagrin, had shot himself; then he saw Ah Lee standing motionless by the opposite paddle-housing, the smoke still curling from the rifle he held. He stepped towards him, but Ah Lee raised the rifle and pointed it menacingly.

"No touchee!" he cried in a shrill voice. "Ah Lee kill 'ou too, kill evlybodee."

"Go back!" said Brenton urgently, seeing out of the corner of his eye that Delie had followed him out of the cabin and was at the top of the steps. "Tell Jim to come down quietly. Quick! I think Ah Lee's gone off his rocker."

Charlie came from the other end of the deck as Jim came down the steps, and Ah Lee waved the rifle from one to the other. His eyes were mad slits, his lips were drawn back to show his big teeth.

"Keep his attention while I try to get behind him," said Brenton. But Ah Lee had his back to the superstructure, and now, keeping the rifle on the three men, he began to climb up on the crates and flour-bags piled for'ard, from there over the rail to the wheel-house, and thence to the wheel-house roof.

From this point he controlled the boat; there was nothing higher, except the funnel. For an hour the others argued, threatened, and pleaded with him. Delie, terrified, heard it all from just inside her cabin door. At last she realised that Brenton, in a desperate attempt to disarm him, was climbing up after the cook.

"Kee' away! Kee' a'way!" Ah Lee was shrilling. "I shoo'! I kill 'ou deadibones-dead." Brenton came on steadily.

Delie wanted to call him to come back, but she knew she must not distract his attention for a moment. With his eyes fixed commandingly on Ah Lee's fanatical ones, he was talking all the time in a soothing voice: "Now then, Ah Lee, we don't want to hurt you. We friends, eh? Just come down like a sensible chap. You can't stay up there all night, and besides you've got to get the tea.

Come on, now. That fireman's been asking for trouble, hasn't he? We don't blame you, Ah Lee. We just want you to come down before you fall. Come on now, let's help you. . . ."

He had his foot in the wheel-house window now, his head above the roof. He stood very still, with the gun pointing straight at his head, and went on talking.

Gradually Ah Lee relaxed and lowered the rifle towards his feet.

"Lee! Ah Lee! Put that gun away now, and come down quietly. Are you listening, Ah Lee? There's no need for you to . . ." and just then he got high enough to make a grab at the gun-barrel and twist it from the cook's hand. He threw it to the men holding their breaths below, got Ah Lee by an ankle and brought him down with a thud on the wheel-house roof. In a few minutes he was overpowered and trussed to a deck stanchion on the lower deck, where he raved and gibbered and swore in Chinese and pidgin for two hours.

Someone rowed up to Winwar to ask for a message to be sent to Bourke for a mounted policeman to take him in charge. Ah Lee became quite quiet by nightfall, but they didn't dare let him in the galley in case he set fire to the boat, so they shut him in the bathroom until the trooper arrived next day.

Brenton opened the portmanteau that was hidden in the galley, and found that it contained a thousand pounds in notes. When the trooper came to take him away, with a spare horse for the prisoner, Brenton handed over the money and the cloth bundle of Ah Lee's clothing, and also a written statement of all that had occurred, including the provocation the cook had received from the fireman.

Thus the crew was reduced by two, and someone else had to be found to cook the meals. All eyes turned on Delie, the only woman on board. Cooking was known to be a woman's job; all women could cook; she was a woman. There was no escaping their logic. In vain she told Brenton she had never cooked a meal in her life, except to boil an egg for Imogen and herself.

Fortunately Bessie had given her a cookery-book when she was

married, and though she had scarcely glanced into it before, it now became to her a bible, its pronouncements as authoritative as Holy Writ. The pages were soon dog-eared, stained with spilt milk and coated with flour, for she referred to it at every step.

The raw materials at hand were so limited that she could not make any spectacular failures. "Take twelve eggs, beat for twenty minutes . . ." she read, and turned the page. There were no eggs, only tinned milk and salt meat, and sometimes a duck, a rabbit or a fish that Ben cleaned for her. The only vegetables were potatoes and onions which had been among the station stores.

Remembering the wonderful meals her Aunt Hester had turned out at Kiandra with the same limited materials, she felt ashamed. There was plenty of flour to experiment with, but her first attempt at making bread was a lamentable failure.

Brenton, who was a good cook but would have considered it beneath his dignity to get the meals, took over the bread-baking. Ben became cook's offside, peeled all the vegetables and did the washing-up.

But in spite of his help, almost every morning there was a reek of burning toast or scorching porridge from the galley, a series of groans and shrieks from Delie as something boiled over or burned her hands. The crash of breaking crockery and the clatter of falling saucepans echoed between the steep banks of the Darling.

For a week they feasted off roast mutton; for a ewe, thin and weakened by the drought, came down the opposite bank to drink and bogged in the mud there. They could have hauled it out but, arguing that if they hadn't been there the station would have lost the sheep anyway, they slaughtered it. The carcase was hung in the shade in a muslin bag to keep the blowflies off.

The crew manfully ate Delie's soggy puddings and tough scones; they actually seemed to like them, and asked for more. But she knew she was a terrible cook. "I'll learn, all the same," she vowed. "Anyone with normal intelligence should be able to learn anything from a book."

She couldn't try things out on the dog, because there wasn't one; but once she fed the parrot on one of the hard scones she had

just baked. Skipper held it up critically in his claw, put his head on one side and regarded it suspiciously.

"Which of you devils has had the screwdriver?" he muttered, as if appealing for this strong instrument to crack the scone with. Then he began to shell it like an almond, nibbling off the outer crust and letting the pieces fall to the deck like pebbles.

"Cocky wants a drink," he said hoarsely when he had finished. Delie brought him an enamel mug and put it over his head; he wanted a cup, not a drink. He began to sing and talk to himself inside the cup, dancing up and down on his perch in a ridiculous fashion. Delie made a drawing of him and labelled it 'Ned Kelly on the Darling', and Brenton put it up in the saloon.

In the long, mild evenings, the skipper and the men used to lie out on the deck yarning and smoking and slapping at mosquitoes. There was magic in those far inland nights, on that quiet reach of water undisturbed by any sound but the call of night-birds. It made up for the heat and monotony of the day.

The stars were huge and golden in the velvet sky, or the moon rose and turned the desolate banks and muddy water to a pattern of black and silver. No dew fell; the air was dry and warm.

Delie wished for the hundredth time that she had been born a boy. She would like to be lying out there smoking and yarning, but though there was never any overt hostility, she did not often join the men. A subtle sex antagonism excluded her from their circle.

If she came out on deck she felt the constraint; the men sat up and watched their language, looked sideways at the glimmer of her pale face above her white frock, and looked quickly away again. She began to long for a woman's companionship.

'If only I were old and ugly it would be better,' she thought miserably. 'One day, when I'm about fifty—no, sixty—it will be all the same.' But she couldn't really imagine herself as old as that.

As spring advanced into summer it became obvious that the *Philadelphia* would not move again that year. The men had become more discontented and quarrelsome, and began rowing

off to Winwar and getting drunk on cheap whisky. Brenton decided to pay off all but the bargemaster, the mate, the engineer and the deck-hand. Ben could steer the second barge if necessary, until they picked up a full crew again after the rise that must come.

A message was sent for bullock or horse teams to come and lift the cargo, and the crew went back to Wentworth with the first coach that came through. Some would go home to Echuca, but most were rolling stones who would take jobs in the back country until another steamer job was offering.

The pool in which the *Philadelphia* lay shrank lower and lower, but was still enough to float her once she was lightened by the removal of her cargo. This all had to be lumped by hand up the steep clay bank of the river.

As long as she floated, the boat still had the feel of a live thing, and if there was the slightest breeze the ripple-reflections danced in quivering gold over every projection.

But the water grew stagnant, and it became steadily hotter and more stifling on board. The mate grumbled that he wanted to go home to his family for Christmas. Brenton agreed to pay his fare back to Echuca, but he would get no wages until he rejoined the boat.

Delie refused to go back too, and stay with Bessie. "This dry inland air is doing me so much good," she said, "that I believe my lungs are almost cured already. And anyway, I won't leave you. I couldn't bear to leave you."

He kissed her and did not argue. He did not fancy the one woman at the Winwar shanty, who had been shared among the crew before they were paid off; and if they were going to be stuck here for months on end, a woman would be as much a necessity as food and drink. Besides, he would miss her; she was very lovely, even if she couldn't cook.

The men did their own laundry. Delie did hers and Brenton's, taking the clothes along to the rocky reef that was keeping the water back. When she thought of all that went into that stretch of water she could scarcely drink her tea, although it was boiled.

Below the bar the river had shrunk to a channel of mud, with a few little puddles along its dry, cracked bed. In one of these

she looked at the mass of water-life that swarmed in a last frenzy of activity before dying, as the pool dried out. The water seemed to boil with the frantic movement of tadpoles, water beetles, and larval shrimps and crayfish, that fought for the last of the moisture and the oxygen it contained.

She looked with horror at this meaningless, terrible struggle for survival. Why? she thought. Why? But there was no answer.

Ben still managed to get a few fish by going up or downstream to other water-holes that were not fished out. Birds were shy of the ungainly shape of the steamer, but she saw them veering past at sunset: black cockatoos, crested quarrians and cockatiels, and flocks of budgerigars, the little shrill-voiced parrots that looked like shoals of emerald-green fish, as they darted through the blue air.

Brenton could name them all for her, but it was Ben who accompanied her to the next water-hole to watch for their coming down to drink at evening. When he brought her a bright feather he had picked up or a fish he had caught, his shy, dark eyes would light up with pleasure at her happiness.

He never irritated her by looking over her shoulder when she was painting, but he always asked, diffidently, to be allowed to see the picture when it was complete. His occasional pertinent remarks surprised and pleased her, more than Brenton's indiscriminate praise of everything she did as 'jolly good'.

Ben's quiet, gentle ways made up to a certain extent for the lack of a woman's company. Brenton had given her a sewing-machine when they were married, and in the long summer months she found plenty of time to run up the lengths of material she had brought with her. Ben showed surprisingly good taste, choosing styles for her from the *Ladies' Home Journal*, dismissing some as 'too fussy' or 'too old'.

It would be nice to have a husband who was interested in your clothes, she thought wistfully. Brenton never noticed what she wore. If she appealed directly to him for an opinion on a new dress, he only replied that he liked her best in nothing. . . .

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

It was not until the meagre rains of the following season that enough water came down the Darling to float the *Philadelphia* and her barges over the rocky bar that had held her prisoner for nearly twelve months. They made all haste downstream, picking up a full crew as they went, and wired the mate to meet them at Wentworth.

After the long summer they all felt reinvigorated by the perfect winter climate, the cool, crisp inland nights with their frosty stars, the clear blue skies and the dry cold winds that swept across the black-soil plains.

They picked up some early wood, enough to load one barge, but the drought had decimated the flocks so that the clip was nothing like a normal year's.

No following flood came down behind the first rise. There were alarming reports, too, about the Murray; not only had there been an unprecedentedly dry year in New South Wales and Queensland, but there had been scarcely any fall of snow in the highlands.

Victoria had not had its usual opening rains at the break of the season. Tributaries like the Goulburn and the Campaspe had almost ceased to flow.

As the *Philadelphia* made her way cautiously down the Darling in that black year, of 1902, a man was kept in the bows continuously with a pole to sound the channel ahead. At night they tied up, for the shallows were too dangerous to negotiate in darkness when coming downstream.

Although the bare, eaten-out country (where the starving sheep had even dug the saltbush roots to eat them) was out of sight above the steep grey banks, the drought made itself felt. When they tied up, the sluggish current carried past numbers of floating things, bloated shapes with legs sticking up towards the sky. The banks became lined with pitiful shapes—exhausted, starving sheep which had come down to drink and been too weak to extricate themselves from the sticky mud. Sated crows flapped away as the

steamer came past, and the rows of eyeless heads turned their bloody sockets, round which the blowflies buzzed, towards the sound of the paddles as though in mute appeal.

At first, at Delie's frantic request, they had shot the creatures to put them out of their misery, but soon there were so many that no one had time or inclination for the task. Delie shut herself in the cabin and would not come out, even for meals, though now she had the luxury of a cook again. She ate nothing but dry bread (there had been no butter for so long that she had almost forgotten its taste) and tea made with tinned milk. Even the air she breathed tasted of corruption.

When at last they steamed out again into the Murray, after their slow and difficult journey down to the junction, she felt a tremendous relief. But the once noble river was changed and dwindled; a long spit of sand ran out at the junction almost to the opposite bank, and the narrow channel wound between wide muddy flats exposed for the first time in many years. Old snags and sunken barges, covered with grey silt, were drying out in the sun.

Brenton took one look at it and swore softly. "We won't get far on *this* river," he said. "As for getting above the Bitch and Pups, there's not a hope."

A small fresh caused by a cloudburst near the source of the Ovens, hundreds of miles away in Victoria, took them safely over MacFarlane's Reef. But the water drained rapidly away, and then it was winch and warp over the bad patches, sometimes making only a few miles in a day. But at least the cargo of wool was not perishable. At Mildura they had found the growers still gnashing their teeth over the loss of their last season's crop of fruit, which had been left to rot upon the wharf because the steamers could not get through. The railway could not be finished soon enough for them.

Their next season's crop was threatened too, for the water was so low that the pumping plant could not operate and irrigation was at a standstill. Things were so serious all along the river that an Interstate River Murray Commission had been set up to

inquire into the possible locking of the river.

Boundary Rocks and the ugly-looking Jeremiah Lump were passed safely, but after the Murrumbidgee junction, where the tributary was scarcely flowing, it was obvious that they could not go much farther.

They took on wood at Fraser Smith's woodpile, and learned that above the Wakool Junction the river was no more than a series of pools. No steamer had got above the Bitch and Pups this year.

Still Teddy Edwards would not tie up. As long as there was half an inch of water under the keel he pushed on. He had sold one of his barges back in Wentworth, as there was no loading for it and it might hold them back.

Then, round a bend, they came upon a doleful sight: the *Excelsior*, listing slightly, aground on the mud. She looked a fixture. Tarpaulins had been put out, duckboards were laid across the mud to the shore, and set-lines for cod were hanging from her decks. An ironic cheer went up from her men as the *Philadelphia* edged slowly past.

"Come to join us on 'Rotten Row'?" they asked. "You won't get no further, mate."

Round the next bend a whole row of stranded steamers appeared—the *Oscar W.*, the *Resolute*, *Trafalgar*, *Waradgery*, and even small steamers like *Alert*, *Success*, *Cato*, and *Invincible*.

Teddy Edwards, always wanting to be first, managed to make his way to the head of this forlorn group before the *Philadelphia* too shuddered to a stop with her paddles in the mud.

This was different from their lonely stranding a thousand miles up the Darling. There was something even of a picnic air about the collection of steamers, and misfortune shared was somehow lessened.

Delie liked it much better, for in the open Murray Valley—which is really a huge flood-plain through which the river meanders from one mile-wide bank to another—she had a wide prospect, and none of that shut-in feeling that seemed to confine her spirit on the Darling.

From the top deck she could see away across the monotonous

flats of mallee scrub, a sea of dark-green leaves and thin branches; and among them, quite near, the clearing of a desolate, drought-stricken mallee farm. Its fences were half-buried in sand-drifts, its paddocks bore crops of white limestone pebbles.

There were no passenger-steamers among the stranded group, and no women; or if there had been any they had already left by coach. At the farm, though, there would surely be a woman. A suspicion which had been growing in her mind the last few weeks made her long for another woman's advice.

Delie made her way through the brief twilight towards the glimmer of the farmhouse window.

She loitered along the river bank, feeling how strange it was to see the water lying in a lifeless pool; the charm it had had for her was in its irresistible, endless flow onward. Looking towards the south-east, the way the river bent, she saw the delicate bands of colour reflecting the more garish hues of the west. David Davies, and Arthur Streeton in 'Still Glides the Stream', had caught that ethereal effect of light, transcribed it on to solid canvas. If that were possible anything was possible. Tomorrow evening she would try to paint that eastern sky.

Mosquitoes were beginning to shrill about her ears as she made her way over the stony soil to the half-broken gate that led in to the farmhouse. It was only a two-roomed shanty with a lean-to at the back, yet it was softened in the evening light—with its warm glowing window, and smoke curling from the chimney—to an epitome of home.

Pausing under the low veranda, she looked through the open window at the group within. A woman sat sewing at the rough slab table, close to the lamp. Her hair was grey and drawn into an untidy bun, a deep line was creased between her brows, and her skin was leathery with exposure to sun and wind. On each side of the fireplace, where a black kettle simmered, sat a man and a young woman, evidently the daughter, for she was like him in her thin features and mousy hair.

Something in the stillness of the two by the fire caught Delie's attention. The girl stared sullenly at the glowing mallee roots;

the man stared at the girl. There was no sound but the quiet singing of the kettle.

She walked across the earthen veranda and knocked at the door. There was a startled silence within; then footsteps, and the door opened a few inches. The woman, holding the lamp high in her left hand, regarded her through the crack. She seemed inclined to shut the door again, but Delie held out the billy-can she had brought as an excuse for calling.

"Please . . . I'm from one of the boats held up in the reach below. If you could let me have some fresh milk I'd be very grateful. I have not been well . . ."

This reference to her illness, which she felt reasonably sure was now cured, was perhaps not quite honest; but she had felt an odd *malaise* in the mornings lately. The woman opened the door a little wider, and as she took in Delie's fragile form and pale, delicate features the grim expression on her face softened.

"Come through to the back," she said quickly, almost furtively. She set the lamp down on the table as Delie followed her through the door that led straight into the living-room. The man looked at her swiftly, but did not meet her eyes. The girl still looked at the fire. The woman had lit a candle and now led the way to the lean-to kitchen.

Two wide bowls of milk were setting their cream by the back door. The woman took up a jug and half-filled Delie's billy. "Sorry I can't let you have any more now, but I don't want to disturb the cream. I c'd let you have some butter, though."

"Butter! I'd love some. I haven't tasted butter for—oh, for almost a year. But is this enough . . .?" she fumbled with the money she had brought. The woman took it without seeming to notice it, and put it in her apron pocket. Delie described how they had been stranded up the Darling.

"It couldn't 've been worse than this place," said the other, standing with the wrapped butter in her hand and staring out the back window at the dark, flat land. "The everlastin' mallee—I hate it!" She spoke of the terrible year of drought, the loss of all their sheep, their crops withering and blowing away, the paddocks full of stones.

"But you have the river."

"Yairs; the river makes it bearable. But it makes you kind of restless, though—when it's flowing I mean, not how it is now. Never see it so low all the time we bin here; an' that's more'n thirty years."

She turned her head. Her eyes were still wide and abstracted from staring out at the dark, and Delie saw with a shock that they were beautiful—large, china-blue, clear as a child's.

"Thirty years!" she cried, appalled. "Have you been married all that time?"

"You're just married, aren't you? I can tell." Her lined face softened in a childlike smile.

"Just a year ago. My only home since we've been married has been the boat. My husband's the skipper. Won't you come over and visit us tomorrow?"

"I'll see."

Just then a wailing, snuffling noise began beyond a blanket hanging from the roof, that cut off part of the kitchen. The woman's face hardened instantly into its former bitter lines. The brows drew down, the deep angry line was like a furrow between them.

"Sarah!" she called harshly. She thrust the butter into Delie's hands, opened the back door and almost pushed her out into the night, as the girl came through from the front room.

Bewildered by this sudden dismissal, her eyes unaccustomed to the dark, Delie stumbled round the yard, falling over old wheels and bits of rusted iron lying half-buried in the sand. Then she picked up the *Philadelphia's* lights down in the bend and made towards them.

It was so warm that she decided to have a swim, now that it was too dark for any wandering crew-members from the other boats to see her. She got into her navy-blue stockingette costume in the cabin, and enveloped herself in a towelling robe. How lovely it would have been just to step in without any clothes, as the aboriginal girls did at the farm when she was a child!

She found a sandy bank without any weeds to swim from, and launched herself into the cool embrace of the river. The current

was negligible; she floated as though in a great bath. It was very different from the feeling of danger and excitement when she had been learning to swim with Miss Barrett in the upper reaches where the current was strong. And where was Miss Barrett at this moment? On the banks of some great European river, the Rhône or the Danube or the Seine? And was she grey by now? It was hard to imagine.

She floated between two skies of stars, the one above and the one reflected in the still water. She heard a cry from the *Philadelphia*: "Look at this cod, Charlie! A beaut fifteen pounder . . ." and a splash as the set-line was thrown back. She climbed out on the bank, feeling refreshed, as though all the year of Darling drought had been washed out of her system.

As she went to cross the gangplank, Brenton hailed her from the bank: "We're going to have a picnic supper, darling. Get dressed and come over to the fire. You've never tasted fish like this before, I'll bet."

And it was true. She found most of the crew gathered round the fire, and Brenton superintending the cooking of the cod on some crossed wires. When she was handed her portion on a piece of bread she lingered over it, for it was delicious: freshly caught, freshly cooked above a fire in the open, with billy tea to wash it down. She thought she had never tasted anything so good. There were compensations about being held up in this beautiful lagoon shaded with enormous trees.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

All next day she waited for the woman to call, but when evening came she had only seen her in the distance, carrying a bucket between the river bank and the back door. The water-supply for the house, once the rainwater tanks had run dry, was apparently of the most primitive kind.

The five cows and the horse stood listlessly waiting to be fed. There was nothing for them to do, not a blade of grass for them

to crop among the stones.

'Perhaps she's busy today. I'd better not worry her,' thought Delie, buttering fresh-baked bread with the pale but delicious dairy butter. 'I'd better not worry her. I'll wait till she comes to see me.'

She had wondered about the strange, almost animal noises from behind the blanket in the kitchen, the woman's obvious haste to get rid of her, the harshness of her voice when she called the girl. It had sounded like a baby; not her own, surely, she would be too old. An illegitimate child most likely—a 'bastard brat' in the local idiom; and the mother felt the daughter's shame.

'As if it mattered,' thought Delie. She wondered how she could convey tactfully that she had no conventional ideas about such things.

That evening on the river bank, absorbed in her painting of the sunset light, she heard the woman's voice behind her.

"So yer paint, do yer?" It was a flat statement, and held neither admiration nor censure. "I never thought an artist'd find nothin' to paint around here."

"But then you live here. To you it's just the 'everlasting mallee', but I find those slender whip-like branches with their thin leaves extremely graceful, especially when they're silhouetted against the sky. I came from England, where the trees are dense masses of foliage for half the year, and bare skeletons the other half—no subtlety about them, you know. Now, gum trees——"

"You come from *England*?" said the woman, as if Delie had said she came from the moon. "It must be lovely and green over there."

"It is; green and tidy. I was only a child when I left, and now I find that a paddock of dry yellow grass pleases me more than a green meadow. By the way, my name is Delie Gor—I mean Edwards."

The woman turned her large, beautiful, childlike eyes from the canvas and looked at Delie thoughtfully. "I'm Mrs. Slope. I've alwus thought I'd like it on a boat, to travel up and down. That's what I meant—the river makes you restless. Me four boys all

went off, up or down the river."

"I lived on a farm above Echuca, and every time a steamer went by I wanted to be on it."

"Yair. I see the steamers passing in a good season. Never had so much comp'ny as we've had this year, though, with the low river."

They were selling all their produce to the steamers, she said, and hardly kept even enough milk for themselves. The lucerne patch was just lasting out, with water from the river. She promised to keep some eggs for Delie the next day.

She walked back to the boat with her and was shown all over it from the saloon to the galley. Then they sat and talked about dress materials, and recipes, and illnesses and operations (though Delie, remembering the reaction of the woman at Wood Wood, did not speak of her own health); and all sorts of feminine chatter. The one subject she wanted to discuss, babies, was never mentioned by Mrs. Slope, and out of delicacy Delie refrained from bringing it up either.

That night she told Brenton about the mysterious crying she had heard, and that she liked Mrs. Slope but felt there was something queer about her. He was obviously not interested, but after listening indulgently with half his mind for a while, he cut short her flow of words with a kiss.

"Why, you're quite wound up, little 'un. It's a long time since you've had another woman to mag with, eh?"

"Yes, and there was something I wanted to ask her, but I didn't. You see, I think . . . I'm afraid . . . something's gone wrong with our precautions. I mean, Bessie told me her symptoms and I seem to have them all. Do you mind very much?"

"Mind! Good God, having a baby might kill you. You know what the doctor said!"

"But I'm ever so much stronger and better than I was then. In fact I think that doctor was mistaken . . . I believe I'm rather glad." She smiled softly to herself.

"But it will make you ill, and a funny shape, and you won't have time for painting. I believe you actually are glad! Women are, queer creatures."

Next day when she went to get the eggs she met Mr. Slope, and was not impressed. His wife's opinion of him was evident in the contemptuous way she addressed him. He was skinny, mousy-haired, thin-nosed, with reddened eyelids and almost white eyelashes. He seemed to cringe before his wife, to be trying to placate a deep anger that he knew to be justified.

Delie saw nothing of the baby, if baby it was, and the thin, slovenly girl she saw only in the distance, as she slouched down to the river bank for water for the hens.

"Get the eggs while yer there, yer useless lump!" her mother shouted harshly, as the girl came out of the hen-house again with the empty bucket. She turned back without looking up. "The girl's a bit soft," explained Mrs. Slope. "Yer have to shout at her to get anything done."

She took a cardboard box from among the litter round the back door, and going over to the fowl-house as the girl came out again, snatched the bucket of eggs from her with a sort of bitter aversion. Delie felt uncomfortable. There was something poisonous, some corrosive hate, in the atmosphere of this drought-stricken farm.

As she paid Mrs. Slope for the eggs and was turning away, a strange animal babbling and grunting came from the lean-to kitchen, making her almost stop in her tracks. She forced herself to walk on as if she had not heard.

Struggling to finish a painting in the last of the failing light, Delie heard the crunching of bark behind her, and without turning wondered if it were the step of Ben or of Mrs. Slope.

It would not be Brenton, she knew; and the knowledge hurt her. He would be visiting on one of the other boats, and anyway he rarely sought her out. Sometimes it seemed as if he had no use for her except in bed, she thought rather bitterly.

The footsteps stopped behind her, and suddenly she felt her back grow cold. She turned quickly. Mr. Slope stood a little way off, leering at her.

"Good evening," she said coldly.

He put his hands in his pockets and shambled closer, chewing

at a dead gum-leaf that hung from his loose lips. He wore a soiled flannel singlet open at the neck, and shapeless moleskins low on his hips. She felt a revulsion from the unpleasantly reddened eyelids and pale lashes. His nearness filled her with aversion.

"Paintin', are yer? Mind if I 'ave a look?"

He was slightly above her on the river-bank; and rolling her eyes towards him uneasily, without turning her head, she saw that he was gazing intently, not at the easel, but down the front of her smock.

She stepped back abruptly, thrusting her painty brushes into the satchel, folding the easel and inserting the wet painting in the carrying attachment with trembling fingers. A late kookaburra flew straight across the river.¹ Down in the bend the *Philadelphia's* lights gleamed reassuringly.

"Good night," she said curtly, trying to move with dignity, not to break into a run.

"What's the 'urry?" said the man softly, moving after her.

She did not look back or reply, but all the way back to the boat she fancied she heard him following her.

Every day, at almost the same time, the river ran for a little, filled the lagoon where they were trapped, and flowed out the other end. Then the flow would cease entirely until the same time next day. Brenton watched this phenomenon with interest, and even timed it with his watch.

Later he announced that someone farther up was damming the water and pumping it out of the river for several hours each day. Then they stopped pumping and allowed their dam to overflow for a while.

"Mighty nice of them to let us have a trickle of water once a day," he said. "Isn't there a law against stopping the flow of the river, Jim?"

The mate, who was something of a bush lawyer, closed his eyes and chanted rapidly: "'Whenlandabutsuponanatural-stream——'"

"Here, hold on! Not so fast."

“ ‘—the owner of that land ’as a right to take an’ use the water for all reasonable purposes. The lower proprietor is entitled to ’ave ’is flow of water coming down to ’im unaltered in quality subject ’only to the right of the upper proprietor afore-said.’ The trouble, is, who’s to say what’s reasonable in a drought?”

Two weeks later the water stopped flowing altogether. It was agreed that “them b——s farther up are pumping the Murray dry”.

Mr. Slope, though he was the main sufferer and the one whose riparian rights were being transgressed, refused to do anything about it. He “didn’t want no trouble”, he said. But his wife was in distress. They had to have water for the cows.

Brenton took out his .303 and oiled it. Charlie cleaned the rifle that had belonged to the dead fireman. They set off up-river on foot, without Jim Pearce, who said “he’d ’ve gone if there was enough water to float the dinghy, but he wasn’t going to walk for nobody”.

The others came back in triumph, a pair of thin, starved rabbits swinging from each of their belts. Before them had arrived a trickle of water, then a substantial flow.

“It was a big place about eight mile up-river,” said Brenton. “They was hogging the lot, eh, Charlie?”

“Was they! They’d a great dam right across the river bed, and a lagoon stretching back for ruddy miles. Paddocks of lucerne all nice an’ green, and a fruit-garden round the ’ouse. They don’t know there’s a drought on, they don’t.”

“We actually found them making the dam a bit higher. It needed a bit of persuasior,” Brenton tapped the barrel of his gun, “before they agreed that the river belongs to everybody. They’d got an underground tank full of rainwater, too.”

The flow became a trickle again the next day, but did not entirely cease.

At last Delie confided in Mrs. Slope, who had come aboard with a little jar of cream, that she thought she was going to have a baby.

"Then I wish yer joy of it," said Mrs. Slope in a flat voice, looking out the cabin window.

"But . . . surely . . . your own sons! You must have been pleased about the first baby?"

"Pleased! Ah yes, I was pleased. I never knew they'd grow up to desert their mother just when she needed them! I never thought a child of mine would be the cause of me everlastin' shame."

"You mean—your daughter?"

"Yes—her. I suppose you must 've guessed by now that there's a child. That's the sort of a slut she is."

"But it's not such a terrible thing, Mrs. Slope. It's happened many times before, and will again, to all sorts of people. You shouldn't be so bitter."

"P'r'aps I shouldn't. You can't 'ardly blame the girl, being a bit soft, like I said. But him——!" She spat the word from her.

A hateful suspicion entered Delie's mind, so hateful that she crushed it down. She jumped up in her agitation from the bunk where she had been sitting, muttering something about putting the cream in the cooler. Mrs. Slope followed her, and went ashore without another word being said about the baby.

The next time Delie went to the farm for eggs there was no one about outside, so she went up to the back door and knocked. Mrs. Slope's voice called her to come in, and blinking in the darkness of the kitchen she saw her with her arms up to the elbows in dough.

"I came to get a few eggs if I could——"

"Gugg, ugg, gugg," said a voice near her feet.

She jumped, and peered down. A boy of four or five was sitting under the table, arranging black saucepans in a row. He was neatly dressed in a pair of grey overalls and a faded green shirt.

"Hullo, what's yo'r name?" she said cheerfully, bending towards him. But as her eyes became accustomed to the light the smile froze on her stiffening face. The boy was looking at her with small, animal eyes, with a leer exactly like Mr. Slope's.

His head and neck were all in one, the cretinous head no wider

than the neck, the ears set flat against the head and too low down. His loose jaws hung open; a dribble of saliva trailed towards the floor. His expression was one of cheerful cunning.

"Ug-gurr un agwith," said the creature.

"Yes, that is a lady. Now take your things and run in the other room. Go on," said Mrs. Slope gently, "you make too much noise in here."

The boy stuck out his under-jaw in an ugly grimace, but he gathered up the saucepans and trotted off like an obedient animal, grunting to himself.

Mrs. Slope looked at Delie with her large, clear, china-blue eyes. "Now you know," she said. "No wonder that I'm ashamed. He was born like it, and won't never be any different." She was almost whispering. "I swear if there was another one I'd kill it with me own hands. I'd drown it in the river."

Delie stared at her, appalled. The growing life within her seemed to cry out in protest.

"And do you know why he's like that? It's a judgment, that's what it is. A judgment on a unnatural monster—and on her that she let it happen." Her voice had become harsh and strident. "And I have to live with their shame before me eyes."

Delie could find nothing to say. She knew now that she had expected some such revelation, but it still shocked and sickened her. Mrs. Slope came to her aid. She kneaded the dough fiercely for a moment, then spoke in her normal voice. "You wanted some eggs, love? Do yer mind going and getting them from the fowl-house? You might as well have the fresh."

"Thank you," muttered Delie, putting her money on the table. "I must take them to the cook in time for tea, I'd better get back."

She went blindly out into the sunlight. There was a taste in her mouth as if she had been forced to swallow something foul. She made her way to the hen-house, keeping her eyes straight ahead, fearful of meeting the man or his daughter.

In the nests there were fourteen eggs, warm and white and clean. So pure and symmetrical, they held within the potentiality of all sorts of horrors, double-headed chickens, birds without feet

or eyes, six-legged monsters. For the first time she felt a qualm about the coming child.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Delie knew that there was no such thing as a pre-natal impression affecting the appearance of an unborn child, yet she felt a kind of superstitious fear. She didn't want to see that imbecile again with his face of animal cunning; she didn't want to see the girl, knowing her secret, and still less the man.

"I wish we could get away from here," she said to Brenton without telling him the real reason. "This place makes me nervous. Couldn't we, just you and I, go to Melbourne for a holiday?"

"And leave the boat?" He stared at her. "You know I wouldn't leave her. No skipper worth his salt would. And what if a fresh came down, and me not here to take charge?"

Delie felt, not for the first time, a stab of jealousy of the other *Philadelphia*. "Have you ever heard of a fresh in the middle of a drought, in summer?" she asked.

"Stranger things have happened."

She knew that he didn't believe it, but it was clear that he had no intention of taking a holiday with her. He couldn't see the need of it. "You go on your own," he said. "Go down to Melbourne and see Imogen."

"I don't want to go alone. I want to be with you."

For she was still physically obsessed with her husband. Through the day she made excuses to go up to the wheel-house, to stand where she could just touch him as if by accident. And then, when he came into her bunk, she became tense and unable to respond fully. It did not occur to her that a holiday from him was just what she needed.

Mrs. Slope had not visited the boat again, and she had not been to the farm, though there had been the promise of some patterns of baby clothes. Mrs. Slope might be regretting the

impulse that had made her confide in one who was almost a stranger.

Delie felt so nervous and lonely that she took to sitting out on deck with the men in the evenings, especially when visitors called from the other boats.

Sitting with her back to the end of the starboard paddle-housing, a canvas cushion on the deck below her, she found herself one evening next to Charlie McBean.

There was a discussion of boilers going on—Brenton was all for designing an engine with double boilers that would drive the paddles twice as fast—but Charlie was not joining in, though it was his subject.

He seemed very nervous, hitching himself about on the deck, sniffing, clearing his throat, making sudden abrupt movements to ward off mosquitoes. Delie knew that her presence was embarrassing him, but it was too hot to retire to the saloon or her cabin.

His sniffing became louder; it was beginning to get on her nerves. Any little thing seemed to upset her these days. She took out her own handkerchief and pointedly blew her nose.

Charlie was seized with another fit of wriggling and jerking. Then he began struggling with the laces of his old canvas shoes. He removed one shoe, then a black woollen sock; blew his nose carefully upon it; replaced the sock, and then the shoe. Delie was so astounded that she didn't even laugh, until she thought about it afterwards.

Emus and kangaroos, almost tamed by their hunger, were more plentiful than rabbits. Kangaroo-tail soup was on the menu, besides wild duck roasted by the new cook, who was not a Chinese but a very fat Australian called Artie.

He had no outmoded old-world ideas about his position, but called the captain 'Teddy' like the rest of the crew, with whom he was on terms of perfect equality. But like the rest of the crew, also, he called Delie 'Mrs. Edwards' or just 'Missus', with the deference due to a lone woman outback.

When Mrs. Slope came to see her at last, with her great child-like eyes in her ravaged face, Delie realised how much she had

missed her. Mrs. Slope seemed happier and less restrained, almost as if speaking of her secret shame had helped to lift some of its burden from her. "I suppose we must all expect our cross in life," she said, and that was the only reference, however vague, that she made to what had passed between them.

She had brought patterns for tiny night-gowns and dresses with tremendously long skirts, and fantastically small bodices and sleeves.

"But they're too small!" said Delie. "These wouldn't fit a doll—not a good-sized doll."

"You don't know nothing about it. How big a baby do you think a little thing like you's going to have? They don't weigh more'n seven pounds usually."

Between them they unpicked two of Delie's white night-gowns and a full-skirted cashmere dress, for she had made up most of her material before realising that she would need it for baby clothes. The sewing-machine whirled all day. Mrs. Slope had brought some white wool too, and Delie began knitting, as busy as a bird preparing a nest. It went through her mind that Aunt Hester would have liked to see her employing herself in these domesticated tasks—poor Hester who had had no grandchildren, whose only son had died without issue.

By March the small trickle from above had entirely ceased, and another expedition up-river, with rifles, revealed that there was none flowing above either. The whole great Murray had ceased to flow, and was nothing but a long chain of stagnant water-holes.

You could walk across the river under the Swan Hill bridge, they said; and down in South Australia there were thirty boats lying in the mud at Morgan, like logs in a jam. The members of the River Murray Commission, who had set off by boat last year to examine the river, had had to take to road vehicles somewhere below Renmark. The urgent need for dams and locks could not have been made more clear.

Delie looked at the dead pool in which the boat lay, still afloat; and she thought about the endless flow of time, and how often she had said, "If only time would stand still! If only this moment

could last for ever!"

She saw now that this would mean stagnation, the end of all change. Would she still be the child absorbedly digging moss from between the rose-coloured bricks in her grandfather's garden—a sentient, but almost animal creature, feeling warmth, breathing the earth-tang of the moss, seeing the contrast of rose and emerald, but without thought? What had that child known of the beauty and terror of life?

Even the happy, drowsy girl standing among the golden buttercups with Adam lying among the fallen gum-leaves in the bush . . . No; she preferred growth, experience, change, the soft relentless flow of time. The river that carried all away on its unreturning stream was for ever renewed and renewing, though the individual drops were lost in the great sea that waited somewhere ahead.

She was now twenty-three, and her baby would be born in May. The weeks and months had passed imperceptibly in this strange arrested life, but time was measured for her by the growing life she carried, the first faint movements of which she had felt with mingled delight and fear. If the river had not begun to move by the end of April, she would leave for Swan Hill and go down to Melbourne for the birth.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

In April, month of new birth, month of Easter, the river began to move; first a trickle, then a muddy, swirling flow along the bottom of its bed—so small, so dirty, that it was hard to believe the stream would ever flow deep and clear again.

Wires were sent off for missing members of crews, expeditions were made to Swan Hill to pick up others, tarpaulins were taken in, and all was made ready for departure as soon as there should be enough water under the ten red-gum keels of the stranded steamers.

The *Philadelphia* was in beautiful condition after her two en-

forced rests, when the remaining crew-members had occupied themselves with painting, scraping and repairing until she looked like a new boat.

In the first week of May she moved off upstream. Teddy Edwards, always impatient, determined to be first, had no intention of waiting for a good river. A couple of inches under her keel was enough.

At Swan Hill there was a delay. It was so long since any steamers had been through that either the lift-bridge or its operators were rusty; they were told it would be an hour before it could be opened. While Brenton fumed, Delie went up to the town to buy some white wool and ribbons, and to see a doctor. He was pleased with her condition, said that he did not expect any complications, but as she had a rather small pelvic opening it would be better for her to have the baby in the Echuca hospital.

As for her lungs, he could find nothing whatever wrong with them. He asked her who had diagnosed tuberculosis in the first place, and remarked that even city doctors could make mistakes. "In fact, my dear," he said, "I very much doubt that there was anything wrong with you beyond a chronic bronchitis."

Mrs. Slope had been terribly depressed at the departure. She had put on a freshly-laundered cotton dress to come and say good-bye. Over a cup of tea in the saloon she told Delie that the farm was already mortgaged, and that there was no more credit to be had from the bank. If the drought didn't break soon they must abandon the place to the crows, and go to Melbourne to live on charity.

"It's got to rain," she said doggedly, staring with her soft blue eyes at the pure, hard blue of the moistureless sky—that sky which had turned the same blue smile on many a wanderer perishing with thirst outback.

Of course it would, Delie agreed; after all it was nearly winter, wasn't it? And at least the river was flowing again.

"Yes, and that means you're going. It's been—you don't know what it's been to me, having someone to talk to after all these years. Thank you, dear, and God bless you," and she

pressed a little hand-crocheted pillow-slip into Delie's hands.

Delie caught the rough, cracked hands in both of hers. "It's meant a lot to me, too," she said warmly. "And thank you for all your kindness. It seems unfair that I should be so happy, and you've got so much to bear—the drought, and—and everything," she stammered, feeling that she could not refer more directly to what had passed between them.

"That's all right, dear. Good luck, and I hope it's a boy."

It was a boy; but it was not born in the Echuca hospital. A week after they left they were still struggling upstream, winching and warping along past Black Stump, Funnel Bend, Kelpie's Leap, and all the difficult places in the narrow, winding, snag-filled channel that skirted Campbell's Island.

Here the black swan and wild duck were in thousands. The swamps and backwaters, the wide sheet of the Moira Lakes, were still dry; and the birds had all congregated in the tree-lined channel that had not been disturbed by steamers for almost a year.

Although the spring rains had come down from the highlands to fill the channel, the weather was summery still. Charlie, who was a self-styled weather-prophet of the pessimistic kind, gloomily prophesied another year of drought.

"One more year like the last two, and the river trade'll be finished, mark my words," he said. But as for years past he had been saying every spring, "This'll be the worst summer ever, you'll see!", no one took much notice of him now.

At Euston, Tooley Buc, and Gonn Crossing, where there were punts to take traffic across the river, they heard that bridges were soon to be built.

"More difficulties put in the way of navigation," growled Brenton. But at Koondrook they found the bridge already completed, linking it up to the New South Wales town of Barham on the other side. At their whistle crowds came running from the two towns, for this was to be the first steamer through. A cheer went up as Brenton churned through the narrow lift-section, only a few feet wider than the boat, at full speed.

Delie, who was in the wheel-house, held on nervously until they were through; the child she carried made her more anxious for her own safety than before. But Brenton only laughed, pleased by the admiration of the crowd.

He had been taking a rest in the cabin through the last fairly open section of river, only coming up to the wheel-house to take her through. His blue eyes looked bloodshot, his bright curls were rumpled, and there was a short, fair stubble on his chin. He was often careless about his appearance these days, would shave when he felt like it, and slopped about the deck in old canvas shoes bursting at the toes, or barefoot.

The *Philadelphia* went on her way, not knowing that she would be the last steamer through for a fortnight. For the excited crowd, impatient for the bridge to be down again so that they could cross, jumped upon the mid-section before it was back in place. The bridge fell at once with the weight, the pulley-wheel whizzed round madly and flew to pieces with centrifugal force, just missing the two men who had been winding. It was two weeks before another wheel was cast and installed.

The day they left Barham was hot and dusty, with a north wind bringing a scorching breath from the drought-dried heart of the continent. Though their general direction was south-east, the river wound so much that sometimes the wind was behind, sometimes head-on.

It was late afternoon, and Brenton was staring with gritty, bloodshot eyes through the red haze of dust at the narrow channel. Delie was resting her heavy body and swollen legs in the cabin. The baby had moved lower and become quiet, as though gathering its strength for the great effort of birth.

Suddenly there was a confused shouting on deck, a thudding of feet, and she sat up in nameless alarm. She heard the clatter of buckets, the thumping splash of water. Surely they were not going to wash the deck at this hour? Then an acrid scent drifted in the open door, a smell she had learned to know and fear—the smell of fire.

She rushed out and into the wheel-house next door. Brenton, with his jaw set, was trying to bring the *Philadelphia* round, for she

was travelling straight into the roaring, hot wind; and from the forepeak flames and black smoke were climbing. The flames, fanned back by the wind, were licking already at the front of the superstructure with its new paint. Skipper, the parrot, was swearing in Danish, and excitedly demanding the screwdriver.

"Go and get in the dinghy," said Brenton through his teeth. He swore savagely, wrenching at the wheel.

"I won't go without you."

"Don't be a fool." With dreadful rapidity the woodwork had caught fire, and flames were now leaping at the windows of the wheel-house.

"Leave it—we'll have to abandon her!" he shouted to the men who, in spite of all they could do, were being forced back into the waist of the steamer. Ben came rushing up the steps with white face and singed eyebrows.

"The Missus, Captain——?"

"Take her to the dinghy—quick, lad."

Ben took her arm, but Delie dragged away and rushed into the cabin.

She had no time to think. Her paintings were on top of the chest, her baby's clothes in a case under the bottom bunk. In a moment she had rolled up the canvases and thrust them inside the neck of her dress, and rushed out again as a swirl of black smoke puffed in the door. Ben grabbed her and began hurrying her aft, but already the paddle-box was in flames and the steps were gone.

Delie dragged back. "Where's Brenton? I won't go——"

"He's all right. He'll have jumped overboard. We'll have to jump, too."

She stood petrified, staring at the water that seemed such a long way down. A flame licked against her foot, and Ben gave her a swift push. Screaming, she dropped into the river and felt cold water close over her head.

When she came up after seeming to go down into endless depths, she heard, like an echo off her own cry, the steamer's whistle blowing off in a continuous peal. Brenton had tied the lever down so that the boiler could blow off steam and would not

burst at the sudden cessation of motion; for, unable to turn so that the wind was behind, he brought the *Philadelphia* up as far as he could on a shoal which he knew ran out from the left-hand bank, and beached her there. Then he unchained the parrot and jumped overboard just as his clothes caught alight.

Ben had become separated from Delie in the dust and smoke, and with a dreadful feeling of aloneness she struck out for the bank with her weighted body, cumbered by its long dress and smock.

This was the second time she had been precipitated into the water from a sinking ship. She had not even stopped to unlace her shoes. Absurdly, a poem she had learnt in the schoolroom with Miss Barrett came into her head:

Toll for the brave,
The brave that are no more:
All sunk beneath the wave
Close by their native shore . . .

It was not at all apt; but it was the *Philadelphia* she mourned for, burned and sinking beneath the river that had borne her so long. Brenton would be all right, she knew. But she was beginning to be alarmed for herself, and the life within her.

Then a wet golden head appeared in front of her, a reassuring flash of white teeth.

"All right, darling, I've got you. Just relax. Lie back in the water." And with a delicious feeling of repose she lay back in his arms and floated into unconsciousness at the same time.

She woke from a vivid dream that she was on that far southern beach with Tom, her first rescuer. Then she saw Brenton sitting beside her, and smiled. Then a pain took her in a sudden savage grip, front and back, shook her violently as if she were a rat in the mouth of some huge terrier, and laid her down gently to recover.

But just as she was drifting off to sleep, quite relaxed, the pain seized her again. It shook her a little harder this time, and let her go again more reluctantly.

She struggled to sit up, in a swift panic.

"Brenton!"

"It's all right, dear. Just lie still." A large hand held her down gently. "You fainted as I was bringing you in—a perfect piece of co-operation, really. We can't be far from Torumbarry station—George has gone up-river to see how far. We can get some sort of vehicle from there, if there's any way it can be brought through the scrub. But anyway one of the other steamers can't be far behind."

The pain had receded, and she asked calmly after the boat.

"The poor old girl's burned to the water's edge, but she's fast on a sandbank and we'll be able to rebuild her. Thank goodness the barge and the wool are safe. We'll need all our pennies after——"

"Brenton!"

This time the panic in her voice, the dark suffering in her blue eyes, really alarmed him.

"What is it? For God's sake, are you hurt somewhere?"

"Brenton, the baby's coming!"

He stared at her, the same panic reflected in his face. "Oh, no!"

"Yes." And another pain took her in its relentless grip. She clutched his hand in her extremity, but as he winced and drew in his breath she saw the hand was roughly bandaged with a torn shirt. In a moment she forgot her own pain and fear.

"You're hurt!"

"Only my hands. They got burnt while I was at the wheel, trying to get her round. I put some grease from the steering-chains on them. They're all right, just a bit sore. Darling, is the pain bad?"

"Not really, but each one is a bit worse, and—and I'm frightened." Her pale lips quivered, and she began to shiver, for her clothes were soaked.

"Oh, God! What can I do?" Brenton stood up and clutched his damp curls in despair.

A thin figure, with wet dark hair plastered down about a white face, stopped beside him. "Excuse me, Skipper, but I brought

some dry blankets from the barge for the Missus." He spoke above a bundle clasped in his arms. "And one of the men had some clean underclothes, all been boiled. You'll need plenty of clean cloths, and hot water——"

"Ben! Do you know something about these things?"

"Yes, Cap'n Edwards. I helped the midwife more than once, with my mother. We must get a fire going, and some water boiling; and you had better help the Missus out of them wet things."

The skipper hastened to do as his youngest deck-hand told him. It was pathetic to see how helpless and how frightened he was. Between her pains, in the wonderful respite that came, at shorter and shorter intervals, between each one, Delie smiled to see his eager blundering. She was not frightened now, only excited.

She saw Brenton take Ben apart, and saw Ben's solemn nod of understanding, and knew that he was being told that she was delicate, that the doctor had said she should not have a baby at all.

But there was no room for fear. All her will, all her powers of resistance, were concentrated on bearing the present. "Oh God, if it would only stop, oh God, if it would only stop," she muttered over and over; but she knew that it would not stop, nothing could stop it now.

Once again, as on that first night in Brenton's bunk, she felt herself possessed by something beyond the individual, by the relentless and impersonal force of life. Like a straw tossed on a flooded river, she was borne along by the resistless pain, flinging herself from side to side in a hopeless effort to escape. She moaned regularly, and began to vomit with the pain.

Brenton clutched his head with his bandaged hands. "I can't stand it!" he yelled wildly. "Someone row me over the river, I'm going to Echuca for a doctor. This might go on for hours. Why doesn't another boat come? Even if Jim brings the wagon, we couldn't move her now. Ben——!"

He could not say any more, only wrung the boy's hand as he turned away.

It did go on for hours. Brenton's big-boned child, which had possession of her small and delicate frame, fought its way slowly and painfully towards the light.

The life-force took no account of the vessel that bore the new life, as the seed bursts the pod in order to be free and grow; but in the long struggle the new life suffered too.

Delie was dimly aware of Jim Pearce's return, well after dark, of men's figures moving on the edge of the circle of firelight, of Ben's soothing voice, his touch on her sweating brow as tender as a woman's. In those hours she seemed to live as long as in all her life before, as if Time had frozen to the imperceptible flow of a glacier; yet the whole experience had the quality of a dream, lived in some borderland of reality.

She asked for Brenton, but he had not returned. She felt indescribably lonely, even with Ben beside her, whispering that the doctor would soon be here. Then, with a shock that made her forget everything else for the moment, she looked straight up and saw the stars.

There were the stars! Unchanged, wheeling with majestic, unvarying pace across the sky, when she had felt that everything in the universe was contracted to the little core where she struggled to deliver her child. The Milky Way was a river of calm light, the Scorpion swung towards the west like a giant interrogation-mark, a jewelled, eternal question.

It was long after midnight when the last stage began. Now she was sure that she would die, she could not endure this and live; yet it did not matter. 'Any end to this must be welcome,' she thought, listening with detachment to the animal scream that was forced from her own throat. Then a blissful unconsciousness descended, from which she woke in perfect peace. The dreadful rapids were behind.

The mood of detachment remained. She felt no shame at the intimate things Ben had to do for her; they were like two initiates of a new religion, they were within the holy circle.

The raging north wind had stopped, and a cool southerly, gentle, with a moisture-laden breath, had blown the dust away. The early hours were clear and mild. Delie looked up and beheld,

upon the night's starred face, huge cloudy symbols that mingled with her dreams. She slept the sleep of exhaustion, without noticing that she had not heard the child cry.

At last the doctor arrived with Brenton, who had brought him almost by force from his bed. They had driven to Perricoota station, and walked through uninhabited scrub from there. The doctor, alarmed by her weak pulse, administered a stimulant at once by injection. Then she asked, faintly, to see the baby.

There was a small, difficult silence. The doctor, who had kindly eyes set among wrinkles, and a large grey beard, patted her hand. Delie's eyes flew open to their widest extent.

"What is wrong with the baby? Of course, I know . . . I had a feeling all along. Crippled?" she asked pitifully. But it wasn't a twisted body that she feared.

"No, my dear. A perfect male child." The doctor cleared his throat. "But unfortunately . . . It was a difficult birth, and it did not live."

"It doesn't matter, darling," said Brenton eagerly, putting his bandaged hand on hers where it lay limp on the ground beside her. "It's you that matters. Thank God you're all right."

"The lad did very well to bring the mother through. A very difficult birth. Some stitches will be necessary, and the sooner the better. If someone will hold the lantern, I can manage here, I think."

The doctor directed Ben to make a rough table of three boxes, and they lifted Delie on to this. But Brenton could not bring himself to watch. It was Ben, with his thin, suffering boy's face, who held the lantern in a hand that trembled slightly.

Delie drifted off into unconsciousness again, to the accompaniment of a sickly smell and a fireworks display of pretty, coloured wheels. Her last conscious thought she uttered aloud, in a drowsy voice:

"A perfect male child. Perfect . . . What a waste."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Delie's baby was not the only casualty of that disastrous fire. The fat cook was lost, presumably drowned; his body was never recovered. The parrot had disappeared into the bush. Charlie, who had stayed with his precious engine till the last moment, had his hands badly burned, and the burns turned septic. He was admitted to the Echuca hospital, where he stayed while the *Philadelphia* was towed to the dry dock and rebuilt.

Delie had lost all her clothes but what she wore, all her paints and brushes, and the things she had prepared for the baby; but her canvases, the record of those two years of inland drought and heat, were safe.

When she felt better she decided to hold a show in the Echuca Mechanics' Institute. Mr. Hamilton put one of her pictures in his window with an advertisement of the exhibition, and Mr. Wise, her former master, brought his students from the School of Arts. She collected a good return of shillings paid at the door.

Daniel Wise bought for the school one of her Darling oils. He was tremendously pleased with the progress of his former pupil. She also sold two traditional studies of sunrise and sunset reflections, painted at the lagoon in the Murray where they had been stranded.

The other pictures were mostly too 'modern' in their realistic treatment of drought and heat and despair; they were 'ugly and depressing', the visitors told each other, and besides they weren't solid enough. Some of them looked as if they were dissolving in light.

Delie did not mind. She was buoyed up by the praise of Daniel Wise, who wrote a notice of the exhibition. Her uncle came in to see it, and was so pleased that he was moved to tears of joy as he shambled from picture to picture, peering short-sightedly. Delie's depression began to lift.

Brenton didn't understand or share her feelings about the child's death. He had known she did not really want it. How

then could its loss mean so much? he wondered, looking at her shadowed eyes and rebellious mouth, which had lost a little of its youthful sweetness.

But Delie, whose breasts ached with the milk that was not needed now, bound a tight cloth round them and felt that the constriction was about her heart. She could not tell Brenton—it was surprising how many things she could not tell him—of her unreasoning feeling of guilt. But she had thought first of him, and then of her paintings, not of the baby she carried. If she had got to the dinghy in time . . . if she had reached a hospital where oxygen was available . . . it might have lived:

And the pictures? Were they worth it? Looking at them critically, framed and hung upon the Institute walls, she felt a little thrill of pride. She had created something, and her technique had developed. They were still not what she wanted to do, they fell far short of her dream; yet she felt that she had managed to capture that feeling of light, heat and immensity which brooded over the inland plains.

She decided to send her three best canvases to the Spring Exhibition of the Victorian Artists' Society. Imogen had written of the Society's latest activities: "We are a strong body now, though the leading lights, Arthur Streeton and Tom Roberts, are both in London. But at least we have the principle of *practising artists* running the show, not a lot of old fuddy-duddies who paint china. . . .

"But High Art, I'm afraid, doesn't provide bread and butter. I've started designing calendars and book-markers which I sell to a handicraft-shop in Little Bourke Street. I even took a job selling religious books from door to door on commission, but I wasn't much good at it.

"I'm painting hard. Did one of Prince's Bridge, all gold light and deep blue shadow, under the arches, which is one of the best things I've ever done! Do you realise I'll reach the alarming age of *twenty-two* this year? God, I feel alive . . ."

Prince's Bridge! Delie thought of Melbourne on a misty morning, its green lawns and grey streets, its delicate spires melting into the soft sky, the Yarra reflecting them all. It seemed that it

must be on another continent, almost another planet, from the hot, dry immensity of the inland plains, or even from the wheatlands of northern Victoria, still dusty and drought-stricken. Starving stock were being brought over the bridge from New South Wales, and taken down by train to paddocks on the outskirts of Melbourne.

She began to long for the green, gracious city again. When she had recovered her strength, and Brenton was established comfortably in a boarding-house while he supervised the rebuilding of the boat, she took the train to the south.

With every mile her excitement grew; she watched the blue signs fleeing backwards: Eighty Miles To Griffiths Brothers for Teas, Coffee, Cocoa . . . Seventy Miles . . . Fifty . . . Emerging from the station into the traffic that raced up and down as it had done unceasingly all the time she had been away, she felt newly young and light-hearted.

The experiences of the last two years, which had set her face in firmer lines, seemed to roll away from her; but they had left their mark in the passionate rebelliousness of her mouth, the faint line of distress that was creased between her level brows.

She stayed with Imogen, who was currently without a lover, and delighted to see her. Delie wandered round the flat, looked out the windows, admired or criticised Imogen's latest canvases, and felt again the strangeness of returning in space to the setting of a time that was past.

"You look well," said Imogen grudgingly, "but I'm sure it's not a suitable life for you. You're still terribly thin. You shouldn't live on a boat."

"But why not?"

"Well, it's so far away from everything, and . . ."

"I'm not sure that isn't a good thing for an artist. I get a terrific yearning for Melbourne, and for the good talk and stimulating company of the studio days, and yet . . . everyone has to work out his own salvation, and he can probably do it best alone, away from the influence of other artists and the distraction of the city."

"Distractions, yes! I know I don't work nearly as hard as I should."

"Oh, *you'd* find distractions anywhere—I know your sort of distractions."

Imogen smiled and smoothed her sleek black hair with a graceful, catlike movement.

"There are none at the moment, truly! I got fed up with the last one. He wanted me to marry him and settle down to suburban respectability in the same house with his widowed mother. I ask you——!"

"You see, I have all the advantages of home life without the deadly dullness of the suburbs. Even a garden, in window-boxes—or I had before the fire. And everything will be new, and Brenton has promised to build a water storage tank to be filled from the engine, so we'll have hot water all the time when we're running."

"But it isn't safe, you might have been killed in that fire. Though I suppose you're really glad about the baby. I mean, it would have been a terrific tie, and if you want to paint——"

"Glad!" Delie was looking at her in horrified amazement. A flush rose slowly from her throat to her cheeks. "I'm afraid you just don't understand, Imogen."

"Oh, well . . ." Imogen looked uncomfortable. "I guess I'm not the maternal type, darling." She changed the subject hurriedly. "I say, I must show you the new negligee I designed myself. It's white chiffon, lined with flamingo pink. . . ."

Delie stayed on for the Spring Exhibition, for which her three pictures were accepted by the selection committee; but not one was sold. People bought the fresh flower-pieces, the familiar views of the Yarra, the paintings of picturesque cottages and well-known churches.

Her landscape, 'Beyond Menindie', showed an iron shanty, a few sparse iron-grey trees, and a vast plain melting into mirage. "Interesting, but I wouldn't like to live with it," was one comment she heard from a well-dressed matron.

The second of her pictures was a study of a huge thunder-cloud in an intensely blue sky, throwing its shadow over the salt-

bush plain. Into the third, 'Mallee Farm', she had put some of the horror of the drought, the starving, dispirited stock, the white limestone gibbers lying in the paddocks, the drifts of sand over the fences; and something of the drought of the spirit that had seemed to pervade the place where they were marooned.

The press critics mentioned them: "Three unusual studies by Delphine Gordon include two rather sordid, dreary interpretations of the outback scene, and a vivid, arresting cloud-study . . ."

"Her improbable blues and staring highlights . . ."

"An attempt to catch the atmosphere of desolation . . ." This last was better; it showed an appreciation of her aims. But she cared little for the critics. What mattered was the judgment and commendation of her fellow artists, and the stimulus of talk with people who could see what she was trying to do. She began to feel a new creative urge; and with it, an overwhelming desire for Brenton.

He took her in sleep, in dreams, and she woke trembling with longing for his presence. She waited only until after her appointment with the doctor, who confirmed what the doctor in Swan Hill had told her: there was nothing the matter with her lungs. She took the next train back to Echuca.

That night they slept little. The boat was nearly finished, and, as Brenton said, they would soon be back in the discomfort of separate bunks; he wanted to make hay while the sun shone.

"You are certainly a most indefatigable haymaker," she said with a drowsy chuckle when he woke her for the fourth time. Brenton leaned above her and looked at her face in the dim, filtered moonlight from outside.

"It's your fault," he said. "You're different altogether. What have you been up to in Melbourne?"

"Nothing. I just feel different. I feel wonderful."

"Then why did you cry tonight, the first time?"

"Because I was so happy."

"Well——! I give up."

The next day she felt immortal, transfigured. The man-child who had invaded her body, who had almost destroyed it in getting born, had not come to perfection in vain. All the love

TIME, FLOW SOFTLY

that had been building up for the coming child now turned towards her husband; she was, mysteriously, both his mistress and his mother, and for the first time wholly content.

PART THREE

Towards the Final Shore

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The drought had broken. The Murray and the Darling both came down in good volume in the spring of 1903. The *Philadelphia*, brand new above decks, smartly painted in white with her name in black letters on the front of the wheel-house, set out again on her travels. Her paddles seemed to turn with a gayer rhythm.

Her namesake was happy too. She wanted nothing more than to paint all day, and lie beside Brenton all night. She had accepted by now the limitation of their relationship; he spoiled her, and petted her, and ignored her when he had a man to talk to. Now she no longer minded.

He had given her a free hand in redecorating the saloon and the cabins, where she had crisp blue-and-white cotton hangings at doors and windows, with bunk-covers to match. Travelling up and down without the hazards of drought conditions, she felt that her life was one long holiday. Even the Darling River seemed a different place when it was not lined with starving stock; and seeing the box-trees in creamy blossom, and banks of sand covered with the white blooms of Darling lilies, and the carpets of wild-flowers that sprang up after the rain, she realised that it could have its times of softer beauty.

But the river trade was sadly diminished. Settlers had become used to doing without the steamers in the two drought years, and railway-lines now tapped the river network in so many places that loading was scarce.

Cut-throat freight charges introduced by the governments of New South Wales and Victoria, both trying to draw the rich river trade to their own capitals, made it difficult for the steamers to compete.

Brenton, who had never been satisfied with the *Philadelphia's* performance, had included all sorts of new ideas in her design when she was rebuilt. She now had double boilers, which in theory would make her go twice as fast.

"As if *one* boiler wasn't enough trouble to keep steam up in, an' be weightin' the gauge and watchin' the pressure of," grumbled Charlie. "Nex' thing 'e'll be wantin two engineers; an' when another engineer walks on this 'ere boat, I walks off."

The twin boilers did not improve her performance much, and made a lot of extra work. Brenton became gloomy; he had to recoup himself for the expense of rebuilding, but even on the Darling trade was not what it had been. In 1904, when they were tied up at Wentworth after unloading a half-empty barge, he said to Delie that the "top-end trade seemed to be about done". It was the new railways to Swan Hill, Mildura and Menindie that were the trouble.

The best thing these days seemed to be a floating store like the *Mannum* or the *Queen*, or to have a mail contract like Randell or Hugh King had. He'd been talking to Captain King, who wanted another small steamer like the *Ruby* was before her conversion, for the mail run between Morgan and Wentworth.

"He's rather taken by the *Philadelphia* in her new rig," added Brenton.

"You wouldn't sell her?"

"No, but we could join his fleet, the River Murray Navigation Company—he is the company now—under contract. Or we can go on losing money; one or the other."

Captain King asked them on board his steamer for dinner. He was travelling as skipper on the *Gem*, the largest and most luxurious passenger steamer on the Murray, with Jim Mutchy as mate. The *Ellen*, which was even larger, had turned out to be little use except on a high river, because of her deep draught, and was to be turned into a barge.

The little *Ruby*, with a draught of only twenty-one inches, which had carried mail and cargo for the fleet, was being extended by forty feet and made into a passenger steamer. He would like the *Philadelphia*, said Captain King, to take her place on the mail run; he would prefer to buy her outright.

Private owner skippers, he said, would soon have to join the big firms or give up; trade was getting too uncertain for the man

on his own, without big capital. . . .

"Well, sir," said Brenton, "my wife owns a half-share in the steamer, and she has a sentimental feeling for it, as it was named after her. She wouldn't like to part with the *Philadelphia*, eh, darling?"

"Oh no!"

"Then we'll say no more," said Captain King, bowing gallantly. "A lady's wishes should always be respected."

Delie was charmed by the large, courteous, genial captain with his big grey beard and twinkling eyes; a Father Christmas sort of man, she thought.

"Well, you have a reputation for always being the first through, my boy, and speed is what we want on the mail run. Speed and reliability. It's no use piling the boat up and not getting there at all. About these twin boilers, now——"

"I'm thinking of going back to one. I'm always trying for more speed, but I'm not sure the extra power isn't lost in the extra weight and stops for fuel. Now, I've got these new condensers——"

They went into a technical conversation that was over Delie's head. Soon they disappeared to look at the *Gem's* engines, while Delie talked to the mate, not unaware of the admiring glances of the men passengers in the saloon.

"What a nice man Captain King is," she said impulsively.

"Yes, he's a thorough gentleman. But he's not always so mild, don't get that idea. I remember one time when we were bringing a mob of shears down from Avoca station. At Lake Victoria station we stopped to pick up wool, and the shearing outfit too. Just after the big strike it was, and Lake Victoria was shearing 'black'. You should've heard the riot when those scab shearers tried to come aboard!"

"I remember the riots in Echuca, when I was a child."

"Yes, this was the same time . . . The Avoca men wouldn't let us get a line ashore, kept shovin' us away from the bank with a pole. Old Hughie come out of his cabin with a blanket round him, and asked me what the so-and-so I was trying to do.

"I was a bit annoyed by then, and I asked why didn't he take

over and see if he could do any better, as it 'was his blanky boat. 'You're on till six!' he roared. 'I'll take over then, not a minute before.' So I went on circling round for another hour, with the shearers yellin' blue murder at each other.

"On the tick of six he come out, bellowed at the Avoca men to get aft and stay there, and then he brought her bows quietly in and had the wool piled up to the rails of the top deck for'ard. He made the Lake Victoria shearers, the new mob, climb up on top of the wool. Then he said that the first man that crossed the paddle-shaft he'd throw in the river.

"We had no more trouble; but we missed the train at Morgan."

"He looks like someone who can handle men," said Delie.

Brenton and the captain came back, and they sat yarning a while longer.

"Wonder how I'll get on below Wentworth?" asked Brenton. "I suppose it's not as tricky as the top end—not so many bends."

"The whole of this danged river's tricky. But the worst thing about the bottom end is the wind, when you're in a long, open reach, and the shadows of the cliffs on a dark night. Old Captain Hart, who was on the *Ellen*, ran on a bank one night, thinking it was only a reflection. He was found dead at the wheel with the shock."

"Are there any reliable charts?"

"Yes, Captain Hart made a good one; it's on the *Marion* at present, but I could get hold of it for you. There's some awkward places you'll soon get to know, like the Devil's Elbow—some queer-looking cliffs there—and Pollard's Cutting, a cut-off with a very fast current . . . Your mate know this end of the river?"

"No; Jim Pearce is an Echuca man."

"Then I'd advise you to take someone who does know it on your first trip. There's no way to learn the channel except at first hand. And charts soon get out of date, because the channel moves after every flood. You can go aground in no time."

"Thanks," said Brenton, "for those cheering words. I'll try to find some old bloke who wants a free lift down to S.A."

When they went back to the *Philadelphia*, she seemed small and cramped after the one hundred-passenger *Gem* with her big saloon, her red plush dining-saloon and gleaming woodwork. Delie was excited, wound up with the novelty of dining among so many people, and full of wonder at the luxuriousness of the big steamer. She had seen and admired everything, the up-to-date galley, the little bathrooms with hot and cold running water, the smart cabins with their magical buttons for turning on the electric light.

She had dressed with care, in the pale blue Bengaline with the rose-wreaths, now getting a little tight in the waist; for she had put on some weight with the quiet, contented life she had been leading, and it suited her.

Her white throat and smooth arms no longer showed their young bones; the ripe bosom and rounded shoulders were just suggested beneath the filmy stuff of the fichu. This year she had attained the full flowering of the flesh, after which comes the slow decline as in a tree which has passed its fruiting time.

"God, you look lovely tonight," said Brenton sincerely, as he watched her cross the gangplank—unaided, for he no longer bounded forward to hold her elbow. "I haven't seen you dressed up for ages, and under the electric light you fairly sparkled."

She turned as she reached the deck, a flush of pleasure in her cheeks, her eyes intensely blue in the light of the deck-lantern.

"Do you remember the night you pulled the gangplank in, and said 'Now we are on an island . . . ?'"

"I should say so! And we're still entirely surrounded by water."

As she lifted her trailing skirts and began to climb the steps to the top deck, he caught one of her slim ankles in his hand and kissed it, running his fingers up the curve of her leg. She stood still and trembled under his touch. "Run on up to your bunk, darling. I'll be with you in a minute."

She stumbled in her eagerness, running up the steps. In the little cabin she lit the lamp and stared for a moment in the mirror, into her own brilliant eyes. Then she undressed quickly, pulled the pins out of her dark hair and let its piled-up mass fall about her bare shoulders. She brushed it smooth, and slipped

naked between the sheets.

"Come quickly, my darling," she murmured to the pillow. She lay and trembled slightly with the cold of the sheets and the eagerness of her desire. The outing, the unexpected luxury of the dinner, the coming back with him late at night to a silent boat, had brought back vividly the early days of their love, in Echuca, before they were married.

She waited impatiently, staring at the dark oblong of the doorway, waiting for his step. He had been a long time, surely, if he was only going to the bathroom under the paddle-box. At last she got up and stood just inside the door, listening.

She cautiously put her head out. The cabin opened on the side away from the town, and she could see the dark water hurrying by to its junction with the Murray just beyond. There were voices coming up from below, Brenton's and Charlie's.

They were arguing about boilers.

She did not know how long it was before she finally heard his step on the deck, and started nervously out of a fitful doze.

"Not asleep are you, darling?" he said cheerfully, undoing his tie as he came in.

She was silent. She felt like a glass of champagne that has been left standing all night, flat and sour; and was almost as surprised as he when, at his first touch, she began to sob uncontrollably.

"I don't know!" said Brenton irritably. "There's no understanding women."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Before they left Wentworth Delie enjoyed some social life, visiting other steamers, attending a local ball which was held in the Mechanics' Institute. The whole crew went, except for Charlie, who spent the night with a collection of bottles.

All the men in town, their hair unnaturally sleek, their throats enclosed with spotless neckerchiefs, gathered in a group just inside the door, for mutual support. The girls sat round the walls, wait-

ing demurely for the music to start.

The first dance after Delie's arrival, the moment the music began, there was a concerted rushing movement as the whole male contingent descended upon her. She was someone new, and the most attractive young woman in the room; so Brenton had to fend off the would-be partners and stand up with her himself to save her from the crush.

He danced masterfully but without finesse, and became a little breathless. He was glad to hand her over to Jim after two rounds of the hall.

During the evening she danced with everyone—shearers and deck-hands, drovers and cooks, roustabouts and jackeroos from the nearest stations. Until two in the morning, still looking cool and radiant in a white muslin gown with a black velvet sash, she danced in the light of the hanging kerosene lamps that glimmered through the haze of dust under the ceiling.

She had to cope with some surprising conversation. One broad, muscular bushman, after whirling her round in a breathless waltz without once reversing, looked down at her with sympathetic concern.

"D'you sweat much, Mrs. Edwards?" he asked. "My oath, I do. I'm sweatin' like a pig."

Another, bronzed and handsome and terribly shy, seemed to be looking round desperately for some subject of conversation, and at last brought out, with a kind of gasp:

"What 'orse do y' reckon's the best for a pack-'orse, an 'orse or a mare?"

An elderly little shearer's cook with a large paunch danced her round at arms' length in a polka, and gave her a recipe for brownie.

By two o'clock the kerosene gave out and the lanterns flickered one by one, though the accordeon and the drum still sounded from a dim corner. Reluctantly, borne up by excitement so that she felt not a vestige of tiredness, Delie was persuaded to return to the boat. It was, she thought afterwards, the last night of her youth.

On her first run as His Majesty's Royal Mail steamer, the *Philadelphia* left Wentworth on a sunny spring morning, and instead of making the wide swing round the sand-spit at the junction to go upstream, went with the curve of the waters into a new part of the Murray river she had never entered before.

Rains in Queensland had brought a full head of water down the Darling, while the Murray, not yet swollen with the melted snow-waters from the mountains, ran slow and clear. At the junction, the translucent, dark-green waters of the main stream, and the yellow, cloudy Darling flowed for a while side by side, like two alien races. Gradually these mingled and intermarried, leaving patches of different colour here and there, until about three miles below the junction they became one, in the typical milky green of the lower Murray.

A grizzled old 'Murray whaler', who had been 'whalin' up the Darlin'' as a change from the Murray, drifted into the town just before they left. He didn't like the Darling, and declared that "there was nothin' but 'ungry squatters and lousy cooks" the whole length of that accursed river, who wouldn't give a starving man a hand-out of flour. He knew the lower Murray, he said, "like the back of me 'and", so he was given a free passage as pilot.

His name was Hairy Harry, and he wore a growth of wild grey whiskers among which the mouth was indicated by an area stained yellow with nicotine. His eyebrows were even fiercer and more luxuriant than Charlie's, and his hair looked as if it had last been cut with a pair of sheep-shears, by a very inexperienced shearer.

His old dinghy had sunk beneath him, he said, just above Wentworth. He came aboard carrying all his worldly possessions rolled up in a grey blanket, to which was tied a black billy-can and a frying-pan, and a tin pannikin. Many a hand-out of tea and sugar, and many a pannikin of flour had been carried off in these utensils; and, if the truth were told, many an illicit mutton chop had sizzled in that pan, cut from a sheep that 'prob'ly would 've died any'ow'.

"Me livin' was took from me," said Harry grandiloquently,

"when that there boat sunk beneath me, with all me rabbit-traps an' fishin'-lines an' gear; and now I'm carst orf in a cold world to make me way as best I can. If yer'll give me a passage down to South Oss, Skipper, yer won't regret it, and it'll be the savin' of pore old 'Arry. I'll stick in them irrigation towns till next summer, an' then snatch a few grapes for some grower till I makes enough to buy another flattie."

("He won't get another boat, of course, if he ever had one," said Brenton. "If he gets a job for a while picking grapes, he'll drink all the cash as fast as he earns it.")

"Where do I put me knot?" asked Hairy Harry as he came aboard. He eyed the sleeping arrangements with some disdain, when Brenton indicated a tarpaulin stretched on the after-deck. "Wot, I gotter sleep under there? Don't the pilot get a cabin to 'isself?" But when Brenton didn't bother to answer this one, he walked aft, muttering in his beard.

The two boilers gave trouble all the way down to Renmark. Brenton declared that Charlie wasn't looking after them properly because he'd been against them from the first. He fumed and fretted and worried about the channel, and complained of headaches. His face had become rather high-coloured, and when he was angry it turned purplish; a vein stood out at the side of his neck, distended and blue in colour, looking as if it would burst.

In the end they had to pull into the bank to overhaul one of the boilers. It took nearly twenty-four hours by the time they had damped down the firebox, cleaned the boiler flues and got steam up again.

Delie welcomed the delay because they stopped opposite a brilliant orange sandhill, decorated with two dark Murray pines and reflected in green water. She spent all day sketching and painting.

"The scenery down this end is gorgeous," she wrote to Imogen. "Such colour and variety after the endless trees of the upper reaches! There are magnificent gums in the lagoons (which are sometimes nearly a mile across) and green reeds and willows and coloured cliffs, that look as though they had been carved out of pink and yellow candy, and the sandhills have the most subtle

colours of orange and salmon pink and Venetian red . .

They passed some of the largest sheep holdings along the river: Moorna Station, that belonged to the Chaffey brothers who founded Mildura, and Ned's Corner with its eighty-mile river frontage. Kangaroos and emus were seen on the banks, and pelicans sailed in stately flotillas as they fished the lagoons.

Hairy Harry sat proudly in the wheel-house on a tall stool, giving the skipper advice. Delie, in her cabin next to the wheel-house, heard much swearing, and hands pounding on the spokes of the wheel as it was spun rapidly. She looked out and noticed that a good deal of mud had been churned up by the port paddle in negotiating a sharp, involved bend. When Brenton had got his breath back she heard him speak in rather bitter tones:

"Wasn't that the Devil's Elbow?"

"Eh? Yes, it would be, I s'pose."

"Well, why didn't you warn me? Thought you knew this part of the river like the back of your hand."

"So I did, boss. But the blanky channel 'as moved a good bit since I was larst through 'ere."

"Moved a bit? When *were* you last through here?"

"Well, boss, it's about twenty year, since I was on a steamer, that is. O' course in a flattie you don't take no account of the channel."

"Twenty years! Why, Pollard's Cutting wasn't even there, I suppose."

"Yairs; but she wasn't used much, like. The old channel wasn't silted up much then, an' the skippers mostly went round—it was safer."

"Why, you hairy old hypocrite! You won't be any use to me at all. You can have your free trip and tucker, but you can blasted well get out of my wheel-house, and stay out. Ben! BEN!" he roared. "Come up here and lend us a hand with the wheel round these bends."

Hairy Harry came shuffling down the three steps from the wheel-house. Delie felt sorry for his deflated self-importance as he walked past, muttering darkly in his tobacco-stained whiskers, as his freckled, trembling hand felt for 'the makings' in the pocket

of his worn waistcoat.

He was a real character, and she decided that she would like to paint his portrait. So Harry, deprived of his status as pilot, became a model. He posed on the foredeck, with the wind of their motion blowing his grey beard and ragged locks sideways, his old hat shading his eyes.

Delie found that he was an ardent reader of *The Bulletin* and could quote Banjo Patterson and other bush balladists by the hour. He also had a repertoire of old bush songs, and would beat out the time of 'The Old Bark Hut', or 'Whalin' in the Bend', and sing in a quavery tenor:

"With me little round flour bag sittin' on a stump,
Me little tea-and-sugar bag a-lookin' nice an' plump;
With a fat little codfish just off the hook,
And four little johnny-cakes a credit to the cook . . ."

When he was not singing he entertained her with yarns and tall stories; and Delie felt that he earned his passage.

The healthy state of trade on the lower river compared with that above Wentworth was shown by the number of boats they passed. Apart from passenger steamers and floating stores, they saw the *Pevensey*, *Undaunted*, *Queen of the South*, and *Little Wonder*—so called, it was said, because it was a wonder she didn't capsize. She had an incurable list to starboard, and waddled along like a drunken duck. The *Rothbury*, a small fast boat, and the *South Australian* both passed them on the downward run. After that Teddy Edwards was in a black mood.

Delie, who had been in the cabin and did not know that the second boat had just showed them her wake, unwisely went to the wheel-house to beg him to stop for a little near an inviting sand-bank while he had a swim. She wanted to paint some curious cliffs on the other side, that had been carved by wind and water till they looked like the battlements of a Moorish castle.

"Stop while you paint! Stop for a swim!" He closed his mouth sharply on each word, and she noticed how hard and

straight it was. He glared at the river, and the vein swelled in his neck.

"I—I just thought it was such a lovely spot——"

"I have work to do, in case you don't realise it. We happen to be running on a contract."

"Jim Pearce says we're running ahead of schedule, and——"

"We've just been passed by the *South Australian*, and I'm going to catch her up at the next woodpile," he said grimly. "She wouldn't have caught us at all if they'd handled the wood a bit quicker back there at the last stop. Ben! Slip down and tell Charlie to give her everything, pour some kerosene on the wood if necessary."

Delie sighed, and looked at the pictures slipping by on each side. What a lovely length of river this would be, with its long reaches and fringing lagoons, if you could take your time over it.

She looked speculatively at Hairy Harry, taking his ease on his back on the sun-warmed deck, his hat tilted over his eyes. He 'whaled' the rivers in a slow old dinghy, stopped when he felt like it, ate when he was hungry, slept when he was tired. No clocks or schedules in his life!

And was life meant to be lived in the endless activity of ants? She began to weary of Brenton's mania for speed, for success. The two of them could have lived comfortably on the boat, fishing, swimming, painting, lazing. But he would be bored by such a life. What use, though, to have the fastest boat on the river, to own a whole fleet of boats, and lose your health and youth over getting them?

By now the funnel was sobbing frantically, the whole boat shuddered with effort, and the steady *chunk-chunk-chunk* of the paddles blurred into a single threshing sound. She gripped a wooden stanchion, tense and nervous.

What if the twin boilers burst? What if they hit a snag at this speed, or crashed the bank at a sharp bend? Ever since she had heard of the *Providence's* end she had been nervous; the fire had made her more so. She ventured to put an imploring hand on Brenton's arm.

He looked down at it in surprise and almost distaste. "What is

it, dear? I'm busy."• The endearment was the merest formality; his tone was cold.

"It's just—well, do you think it's quite safe, with the two boilers? I mean, can Charlie watch them both at once?"

"Look, I suppose I know my own job. I don't tell you how to paint a picture, do I?"

That silenced her, and she left the wheel-house abruptly. Three years! Was it only three years they had been married? Already he had changed; what would he be like in ten years, in fifteen?

They passed Border Cliffs and the old Customs House on the South Australian border, entering this State for the first time; and from here to Renmark the cliffs were so beautiful, with their glowing colours and strange conformation, that Delie tried to sketch them as they went past. This was not so difficult, for the river twisted and turned so much that sometimes they would be passing the same cliffs again an hour after they first sighted them.

The cook came up to the wheel-house to say he was out of eggs, and could they stop at the farmhouse just ahead to get some? Brenton looked at the bend of the river, and the wide flat it enclosed. "Fetch me a string bag," he said, "and I'll get the eggs."

He reduced speed slightly, handed over to the cook (who was quite handy at steering; the mate was having his six hours off duty) and dived overboard. As the *Philadelphia*, having circled the flat and negotiated two tortuous bends, steamed past half an hour later, he swam out, carrying the string bag full of eggs, and climbed up the rudder without one being broken. He dragged on a dry pullover and took the wheel again, still in his sopping sand-shoes and dungarees. Then he thrust the throttle lever to full speed again.

In Bunyip Reach, there was such a clangour from the labouring engines, echoing back from the high cliffs, that Delie came out on deck and saw, with a shudder, the blackened trees where the *Bunyip* had burned and sunk with the loss of three lives. The smoke of the *South Australian*—at least Charlie said it was the

South Australian by the colour—could be seen now, just around the next bend.

Black smoke from the kerosene-soaked wood was now pouring out of the *Philadelphia's* funnel, and Delie closed her eyes, imagining the figure showing on the pressure-gauges. Not one boiler, but two, ready to blow them sky-high!

They rounded the bend, and there was the rival steamer, hated 'bottom-ender', in her own home waters. In ten minutes they had overhauled her, and the *Philadelphia*, with a short, insolent blast on her whistle—for Teddy Edwards wasn't going to waste steam with a peal of triumph—churned past so close that the two engineers, popping out from between the paddle-boxes, were able to glare right into each other's faces.

"Yah!" yelled Charlie. "See yer in Renmårk—if youse ever get there."

"Guh! Two boilers! Bet yer blow up!"

But they arrived safely in the willow-lined, tranquil reach of river where the young irrigation settlement was thriving. Rows of vines, covered with the pale green of new leaves, lined the rich red earth, and the dark green of oranges, and groves of pears and apricots, made an oasis in the desert of saltbush and sand that stretched on all sides of the settlement.

Here they left Hairy Harry, who took a last admiring glance at his portrait and offered, rather diffidently, to buy it.

"Thank you for the offer, Harry," said Delie, "but if I could bear to part with it I'd give it to you. I think it's one of the best portraits I've ever done, though, and I want to save it for an exhibition in Melbourne."

Harry admitted that it would be nice to have his portrait hung in "one of them big Melbourne galleries", and he obviously had no money with which to buy it. He confided to her that he "used to paint a bit meself, once", and this statement she took in the spirit in which it was offered, as mere conversation; as she had his earlier statements that he "used to own a share in a paddle-steamer once", and "used to have a bit of a property down in South Oss".

Brenton was impatient with 'the hairy old hypocrite', but Delie was quite sorry to see him go. She had developed a new interest in figure painting, and scouted the town for likely subjects. Once she saw a native girl who reminded her of Minna in her youth, but just as she was going to speak to her a man accosted her, and she went off with him, giggling.

The second morning, while the *Philadelphia* was loading for the return trip, she got up early and walked up to the bridge, past a long lagoon where fish were leaping in a series of silver flashes. The surface of the water was like silk, spangled with silver sequins. She never saw the shape of a fish, only the dazzling flash of the sun on its side as it leaped.

Steam was curling from the still surface of the river, softening the reflections of gum-tree and willow; and standing in the shallows was a buxom, comely girl, cleaning a catch of bream.

Her dress, of a faded pink material, was kilted high about her thighs. On the bank behind her was a fisherman's humpy of bags and tin, with smoke curling from the kerosene-tin chimney.

"Good morning," said Delie, feeling the old excitement flowing through her veins, making her fingers tingle for the brush. The curve of the woman's legs, the curve of her wet arms, the silvery curve of the fish she held, contrasted with the level line of the water and the straight line of the knife; while the silvery green of water and trees made a foil for the warm tones of the figure. "Do you mind if I sketch you while you work?"

She soon had the essentials in her sketch-book, and was hurrying back to the boat for paints and canvas. She spent a delightful morning, painting and yarning with the fisherman and his wife, who gave her a delicious lunch of fried fresh-caught bream. Then she went on working at the picture, and it was well into the afternoon when she remembered that the *Philadelphia* sailed at two.

"Oh, my goodness!" she gasped, suddenly realising the import of the series of impatient toots from a steam-whistle that she had heard vaguely for some time. She gathered up her things and ran, shouting good-byes and thanks.

Brenton greeted her with a thunderous look, his mouth set

hard and straight.

"I suppose you realise we've had steam up for nearly an hour. It's nearly three o'clock. Where in God's name did you get to? Ben's been searching the town, and I've been blowing the whistle till I'm tired."

"I'm sorry, Brenton," she said in a small voice. "I was painting, and I forgot the time."

"Painting! If your painting brought in any return it wouldn't be so bad. But it's just a sheer waste of time *and* money, so far as I can see."

Angry words rose in her throat. What about the time and money he wasted over his 'improvements' to a perfectly good steamer? And how did he know she was wasting her time? The phrase was meaningless; they did not talk the same language. She swallowed hard and managed to keep silent, but she made a fierce vow: 'I'll make him eat those words. And if only money will convince him that I'm any good, I will make money.'

On the return trip she worked hard, finishing the cliff pictures after she had seen the subjects again and made a sort of composite of her impressions; what she called the 'cliff-ness' of the cliffs, with their primitive, aboriginal rock and ochreous colours. It was something new and, though Melbourne people mightn't like it, it must at least startle them into attention.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"You're lucky," said Delie, "that you didn't marry some domesticated type who'd be always fussing about the galley annoying the cook, infuriating the engineer by dusting the boiler—sorry, boilers—and generally getting in the way."

"*You're* lucky," said Brenton good-humouredly. "Nothing to do all day but sit and look at the scenery going by."

"Oh, I know, I know I am! But I'll have to sit and do some knitting from now on. Little garments, darling. About next September they should be needed."

He recoiled, looking at her in horror. "My God! You've got to be careful this time. You're to get off this boat at once, do you hear, and go and stay next door to a hospital. I'm not going through *that* again."

She gave a faint smile at that 'I'.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to take any chances. I'd like to go down to Melbourne, and have specialists and nurses and anæsthetics—particularly anæsthetics."

"So you say now! But I know how game you are—much too game—and you'll put it off and say you're all right——"

"No, really and truly. I want to go to that nice doctor who sent me back to you, even if he did make a mistake and give me a terrible fright. He started all this, really." She looked at his bright, ruffled curls, his sea-blue eyes for once concentrated on her with tender interest, the boat forgotten. Thankfulness for all they had had together flowed through her. "Dearest, I'm terribly glad he did!"

Brenton held her close, caressing the soft dark hair as she buried her face against his chest. The emotion in her voice had moved him, too. He felt a rare tenderness for this irritating, helpless, irrational creature, for ever smelling of turpentine and linseed oil. He had valued her less once she was his; but no other woman had ever held for him her unique charm.

Physically she had improved with marriage. He ran his hands appreciatively over the new roundness and softness of her form. In spite of inland summers the skin of her neck was still like satin under his lips; only a faint, thoughtful line creasing her white forehead, a nervous drawing-down of her straight brows, marked the passage of time. And with approaching motherhood, as happens with some women, her complexion seemed to bloom.

"Why does Ben always clean your shoes for you?" he asked with apparent irrelevance. He held her away from him and looked into her deep blue eyes. "He's not starting to make sheep's eyes at you, is he?"

She laughed gaily. "Ben! He's only a boy."

Brenton laughed too. He was quite sure of her really. In any

relationship with women he had always been the one to tire first.

He was already fed up with his new toy, the double boiler, and Charlie never lost an opportunity of pointing out how wasteful it was in fuel. The speed gained was lost again in loading stacks of wood, for they had to stop twice as often at wood-piles.

Then he saw an old locomotive advertised, with a large boiler having three fireboxes. He became obsessed with a new idea for improving the steamer's performance. Delie worried about the expense when he bought it, and Charlie prophesied that it would use even more fuel than the double boiler. But Brenton transferred to another of the *Gem* line, the *Shannon*, while the *Philadelphia* was disembowelled, and the new boiler installed.

Delie stayed in Wentworth, buying materials for baby-clothes, and feeling a mixture of delight and dismay at the prospect of motherhood once more.

When the *Philadelphia* made her first run after the alterations, she went like a bird. She left even the fast *Rothbury* standing, and could easily show the bigger *South Australian* her wake.

Brenton seemed satisfied at last. Delie begged him to give up his dangerous practice of diving beneath the wheels, now that they went so much faster; but he only laughed at her fears.

"She knows me," he boasted. "She wouldn't hurt me, would you, old girl?" and he thumped the steering-wheel affectionately. "Anyway, now that she goes faster it takes less time for the wheel to pass over me, so it's actually safer, see?"

But she didn't see it at all. She felt, not for the first time, a jealous dislike for her namesake. Jealous of a boat! It was silly, but there it was. She wished he would come to Melbourne with her; but he saw no need for it. Imogen would look after her, and she would be perfectly safe in hospital.

They were travelling up-river, and on their way were to pick up a load of wool and hides for the railhead at Mildura. Delie sat in the doorway of her cabin, for the night was hot, enjoying the breeze of their movement as she sewed by the light of the

lamp behind her. Small insects danced about it in a filmy cloud, or fell in a ring of corpses at its base.

Ben was sitting on the lowest of the three wheel-house steps, playing old, plaintive Scottish airs on his mouth-organ: 'Afton Water', 'Bonnie Doone' and 'Loch Lomond'. A half-moon floated on the calm waters ahead, or danced on the ripples of the wake as they turned. The gum-trees along the banks showed every drooping leaf in silhouette against the moonlit sky.

Delie felt an ineffable sadness, compounded of the wan moonlight, the calm stars, the mournful music, and the steadfast onward movement of the little steamer through a dark and lonely land.

A lantern could be seen waving on the bank ahead, and the two lamps of a buggy beside it. The owner of the wool had come down to his landing to guide them in. As they tied up, Delie discerned a plump womanly figure in a light dress seated in the buggy, so she went ashore to invite her on board.

"Hosts, lassie, I'm no' a body for veesitin', ye ken." Delie saw that her hair was white, and heard without surprise her broad Scots voice; it was as though Ben's playing had been prophetic.

"Ah, go on board, Miss Flora," said the station-owner. "It'll do you good to see some new faces." He introduced her as Miss Flora Anderson, his former governess, who had stayed on at the station to become governess to his own children, now grown up with babies of their own.

The old lady got down, protesting, but obviously excited. Her wrinkled hand, twisted with rheumatism, trembled as she grasped Delie's arm to be helped over the gangplank.

"Och, it's a fine floating hame ye have," said Miss Flora. "And nae bairns tae be tumblin' intil the water?"

"None as yet. But in about six months' time, we hope——"

"Then ye'll wire in the decks, nae doot? Aye, a hame and bairns o' one's ain; that's ae a thing I havena' had in ma life."

She saw Delie's painting-things in the saloon, and admired some of her pictures. "Aince," she said wistfully, "I did a wee bit paintin' masel'; aye, an' played the piano forbye, and sang an' a'. But it's lang syne; lang syne."

"Could you sing to the mouth-organ? We lost our piano in a fire."

When the wool was aboard and they were all in the saloon having a cup of tea, Delie got Ben to play 'The Bluebells of Scotland'. Miss Anderson tapped her foot, her rosy cheeks glowing and her old blue eyes bright. She joined in with a clear, thin, but sweet soprano when he began 'Annie Laurie'. But when she started on 'Bonnie Doone' and came to the lines:

Thou mind'st me o' departed days
When my false love, my false love was true . . .

the tears rolled down her cheeks, and she had to have another cup of tea to calm her.

She left the boat happy and garrulous. "Ca' in comin' doon, and I'll hae some scoons for ye in the buggy!" she cried as they churned out from the bank.

Delie went up and stood beside Brenton in the wheel-house. It was late, and the moon was dropping down behind the trees in their wake; but the reach ahead of the boat was lit up by the great reflectors with their brilliant acetylene lamps, so that the trees stood out as if carved in green jade against the dark sky.

"Wilson back there told me that old girl's story," said Brenton. "Seems she hardly ever leaves the place, hasn't for fifty years. She was only a girl about twenty when she came out as a governess, straight from Scotland, to a place farther up the river. The owner fell madly in love with her—she was a lovely girl, this chap says, and a clever pianist—and not long afterwards his wife died, very suddenly.

"There was a lot of talk about it, and in the end he was charged with poisoning her, and convicted. The sentence was commuted to life, and he died in prison long ago. Miss Anderson was quite innocent, but she was so upset by all the publicity that she hid away from people, except for this family that gave her a job on their station."

"That old thing!" said Delie incredulously. "You mean someone committed a murder for her sake?"

"That's the story, anyway. You forget she was young as you once. One day you'll be an 'old thing' yourself."

"No!. Never!" said Delie violently.

But she looked back at the setting moon, smouldering darkly among black and yellow clouds, that had been so silver-bright before; and a chill feeling settled about her heart.

"Time, flow softly!" she begged of the night. "Flow gently, you dark implacable river."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

In August, Delie set off by train on the long, slow journey from Mildura to Melbourne, to have what she was quite sure would be a son. Buoyed up by excitement, she didn't feel tired even after travelling all night.

Next morning, when the suburbs began with their fences and smoke-grimed back yards and chimneys, she looked down like a god on the innumerable little lives flashing past below. The hoardings on stations, the advertisements painted on walls, the motor-driven vehicles becoming more noticeable in the streets, all added to her sense of adventure.

At the Spencer Street station Imogen was waiting with a taxi. She looked, Delie thought, a little haggard and strained. She had moved to a room high in a city building, with a view over the grey roofs of Melbourne to the silvery Yarra and the cluster of shipping at the docks.

Delie sat down and let Imogen make her a cup of tea on her gas-ring. Then Imogen unpacked for her while they both talked at once of all that had happened in the past year. She never minded letting people do things for her if they liked it. She relaxed utterly, saying, "Oh, it's heavenly to be in Melbourne again, even the shape I am! I'm going to enjoy myself; it may be the last time for years."

She entered hospital two weeks later, rather earlier than she had expected to, and still keyed up to a point where she felt no fear. Towards the end she was allowed to breathe deeply of the blessed anæsthetic, and felt her limbs freeze and the pain whirl up into a coloured ball above her head. She woke to hear the angry crying of her son.

Weak as she was, she insisted on seeing him at once. The nurses held up a little crumpled thing with a purplish-red face and black, damp hair, whose tiny fists beat at the strange, cold air in puny rage. Yes, he was alive! She gave a deep sigh of content, and as soon as the afterbirth had passed, fell into a heavy sleep.

She wanted her son to be modern, so she travelled from the hospital to Imogen's room in a motor taxi-cab, feeling very unsafe as they bowled along at nearly twenty miles an hour. She was rather ashamed of the ugly, skinny, black-haired mite lost in long gowns and rolls of blanket. Brenton would surely expect a bigger, handsomer son than this! (She had wired Brenton at once.) She privately decided to call him Gordon after her father's family.

Imogen, watching for the cab, flew down the stairs to help her.

"'Et me take the 'ittle doo-ums den, was he a ickle ducksy-wucksy pet?" she crooned.

Delie stiffened protectively. "I can carry him," she said. Her child was not to be zoomed over, he was a man-child and must be treated with dignity. "My son," she said proudly. "My son . . ."

Imogen, temporarily free of emotional entanglements, looked after her like a mother. Delie insisted on buying her own food; she fed the baby from the breast. Imogen minded him between feeds. She went out and had her pictures framed. She had a collection of unusual canvases, and felt they would make some impact on the Melbourne art world if she could exhibit them.

A group of artists came to a party at the flat. They sat on the floor and all talked at once, while the baby slept peacefully in his crib out in the corridor, undisturbed even when the party began to overflow out of the door. It was really a private viewing

of her work. Most of the visitors were enthusiastic, and advised her to hold her first one-man show.

So Imogen helped her send out invitations to the opening of "An exhibition of paintings by Delphine Gordon, to be held at Buxton's Art Galleries, Swanston Street, at 5 p.m. on 20th September 1906."

It was a gamble. There was the cost of printing the invitations and the catalogues; on top of the cost of framing; plus the rent for the room, and fifteen shillings a week for the attendant. Delie crossed her fingers and waited in suspense on the results.

Her largest picture, a study of orange cliffs reflected in a billabong, was an art gallery piece, she hoped. She had marked it in the catalogue at 100 guineas. But though women novelists were accepted as being as good as men, women artists were under a handicap. There were very few represented in the Melbourne gallery; yet the fact that she had been a promising student in the Gallery Art School was in her favour.

The Press was invited to a private viewing, and the *Argus* critic did her the service of describing 'The Fisherman's Wife' as 'daring' and 'sensual', while admiring the excellent painting of the flesh tones and the harmony of the composition. After that she took good money at the door—for it was customary to charge one shilling admittance—as a procession of staid Melburnians came to be shocked.

The *Age* admired her cliff scenes, the rich and glowing colour, the Impressionist technique with which she had captured "this little-known part of Victoria, reminiscent of Alfred Sisley's landscapes of the Loing."

She went to the public library and found a volume of reproductions of his work, together with some other French Impressionists. She was dazed and delighted by the 1870 canvases—even in reproduction their brilliance and vivacity, their tender lyricism, made her feel that he loved the vibrating blue of the sky, the curving river between its high cliffs. They might have been painted in Australia, on the lower Murray.

She made several heartening sales, and then came triumph. Three members of the National Gallery Board had attended her

show, and now she was told that the Board wished to acquire 'The Fisherman's Wife', at forty guineas.

No one had approached her for the big picture, and she wondered what she was going to do with it. It was too big to take back to the boat, or to leave cluttering up Imogen's crowded room.

On the last day, one of the visitors was a well-dressed, brown-faced gentleman with a pointed white beard that looked startling against his brown face. He went back several times to look at the portrait of old Harry, with its red sticker showing that it was sold.

Before leaving he went up to the attendant, produced a cheque, and left before she had affixed the small red dot to the large painting, 'Murray Cliffs'. Delie felt that she had seen him before; his long dark eyes were strangely familiar. Looking at the cheque he had left she saw the signature 'W. K. Motteram', and knew who it was. He must be Nesta's father.

In the midst of her rejoicing over the sale a pang went through her, surprising her with its intensity. She remembered the bitter time when she had destroyed Nesta's portrait. Where was Nesta now? Married, probably, and living on the other side of the world, and too wealthy or too busy to keep up her writing.

Did Brenton ever think of her now? A little doubt crept into her mind. Was he consoling himself, perhaps, while she was away bearing his child? She had been of little use to him for some time past, and he was not one who could happily live a celibate life.

'Let me never find out, that's all,' she thought.

Altogether, her show cleared more than a hundred and fifty pounds, even after expenses had been deducted. For a newcomer it was quite a success; but far more important was the seal of acceptance which the Gallery purchase gave her. She felt that she had arrived.

She wired the news to Brenton almost as proudly as she had sent the news of her son. She would show him if she was wasting her time! Then she enjoyed the pleasure of spending her own money, buying some dainty things for the baby, a new night-dress for herself, a present for Imogen, a set of hair-brushes for Brenton. She began to long for him, and for the river, once more.

She loved the city for a visit, but she did not belong there. She took the train for home.

There was no need to defend the baby from any spoiling by his father. When they arrived back at the boat and she had unwrapped his swathes of clothing, Brenton regarded the infant curiously, as if it were some strange phenomenon, gave it a large finger to hold for a moment, and then walked across the cabin, whistling. He began to examine his back teeth in the small mirror over the wash-basin.

"Don't you think he looks like you?" asked Delie, rather crest-fallen. The baby was now five weeks old and beginning to look more as she had imagined he should.

"He looks like nothing on earth," said Brenton.

"He is rather small, I suppose. And I did hope he'd be fair . . . But the nurses say his hair will change later."

She prepared to feed him, undoing the high neck of her dress. Brenton watched in some distaste the greedy guzzling of his son, his passionate attachment to the nipple. He went out until she had finished feeding him.

When he came back, Delie was playing with the baby, leaning over him while he clutched at her dark hair just within his reach. Brenton walked about the little cabin impatiently. At last he said, "Well! Aren't you going to put him in his crib?"

"In a minute. He likes to play a little after his feed."

"You'll give him indigestion, and then he'll yell all night."

He did yell, as soon as he was put down. The milk from a tired and excited mother had disagreed with him. Some of it came up again in a small curdled mess. Delie picked him up, wiped his mouth, patted his back and put him down again. He continued to yell.

"I'm going out!" said Brenton. "I can't stand that noise."

Delie sat and listened to his firm footsteps receding over the wooden wharf. On her first night home, when she was bursting with talk and news! And for the first time in months she was fit to make love to; but he had gone off like that! Was he jealous of his own son?

She sat there stunned, only half-aware of the crying infant, who was working himself up into a rage. She picked him up and buried her face against his baby-smelling warmth.

At last he fell asleep in her arms—this was ‘spoiling’ him, but she didn’t care. She put him down and shaded the lamp, then got undressed and put on the pretty night-gown with blue bows that she had bought in Melbourne. She took out the black hairpins from her dark hair, putting them in a neat pile on the dressing-table, and brushed the soft, shining waves.

In her bunk she turned her back to the lamp and stared with wide-open eyes at her own shadow on the wooden wall: a humped mass, the edge of the sheet, the curve of her eyelashes and the hollow of her cheek. If she had a pencil . . . but she was too tired to look for one now.

Sighing, she turned back the other way. She could see the baby’s head mistily through the mosquito-net that covered him. Then her eyes became wide and fixed. He was quite immobile, and she could hear no faintest sound of breathing. In a panic she leapt from her bunk and tore off the net.

His eyelids were tightly closed, his face that had been flushed with crying had faded to a clear pallor, and one tiny hand was folded beside him into a pale bud-like fist. She watched, holding her own breath, and saw the faint, regular movement of the coverings which meant that he breathed. His lips began to make a small sucking motion as he slept.

Smiling at her own foolishness, she covered him again with the net and got back into her bunk.

After a while the pillow became hot and irufferable. She raised herself on one elbow and turned it over. At the head of the bunk something gleamed in the lamplight, something sticking out from the crack between the edge of the bunk and the wooden wall. She poked at it with a finger-nail. It slipped down a little farther, then she managed to draw it out. It was a hairpin of golden wire. She had never used a hairpin that colour in her life.

“Did you carry some passengers on the last trip, Jim?” said Delie to the mate, as though confirming something she knew

already. Brenton was off duty, asleep in the cabin, and Jim Pearce was steering the boat along the lovely Moorna reach, where the leaning trees seemed to grow out of their own still reflections.

She had not mentioned the hairpin to Brenton. Her suspicions might be unfounded, and anyway she was not going to make a jealous scene. Somehow he would manage to make her feel in the wrong.

"Yair, we had passengers," said Jim rather sourly. "Chap and his sister. Least, he *said* she was his sister." He eased the wheel round by three spokes and set the steering-pole on a white-boled gum almost at the end of the reach. The *Philadelphia* began to cross to the other side of the river, following the invisible channel.

"But where did they sleep?"

"In the saloon—hung a blanket between for a curtain. But she was a menace, that one. Used to come up 'ere when I was on duty: 'Oh, Mr. Pearce, may Ai make a nuisance of myself for a little while? Ai do so love to see you handling that great wheel,' " he mimicked savagely. "I was dead scared o' being alone with ~~her~~."

"I'm sure the Skipper wouldn't have been alarmed."

"Oh, she tried it on with him, too. But he wasn't interested, you needn't worry." Then, realising that this wasn't very tactful, he blundered on: "She wasn't too young, though she made out she was. *He* was always playing cards—the brother. Took a couple of quid off me. I never had no luck playing with him, somehow."

Delie folded her arms along the ledge of the wheel-house window, leaning her forehead against the glass. She ~~said~~ her heart beginning to beat suffocatingly, "Don't you know that card-sharpers always have yellow-haired accomplices?"

Jim Pearce whistled and leant on the wheel thoughtfully. "Card-sharpers, eh? I'll bet that's what they was. She did have yellow hair—well, gold, I suppose you'd call it, though it ~~didn't~~ look quite real. There was something fishy about them altogether."

"Still, they provided some—feminine company while I was away. At meals, I mean," She spoke wildly, the first words that came into her head, and ran down the steps from the wheel-house. Not to the cabin—Brenton was there—but to the bottom deck and into the bows, where she crouched against the stem-post and watched the green water curling past on either side.

"She did have yellow hair." She used gold hairpins, then. She had lain in the bottom bunk in the captain's cabin, *her* bunk, where . . . Delie struck her fist hard against the red-gum block, but she felt nothing. She went on staring at the endless curl of water past the bows.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Oh the nightmare years that followed, the sleepless nights, and days filled with nappy-washing, with hushing children so that they would not annoy Brenton, with terrifying childish ailments to be cured without aid from a comforting family doctor!

How could she have known, thought Delie in despair, what it would be like to bring up a family of young children on a boat? She could not tell them to 'run and play outside'; she could never relax, unless they were asleep, for fear of their falling in the river. She had never meant to have more than one child, or perhaps two, at sensible intervals; and almost before she knew it there were three, the eldest only a toddler.

After her discovery, she had been bitterly determined that there should be no more. Gordon was hers—she announced flatly that ~~the name~~ his name, and Brenton grumbled but gave in. She decided to go to bed early and pretend to be asleep each night until he understood that she was no longer his plaything. She would not share him with every passing passenger.

She should have known that it would be no use. She still loved him, whatever he did; and his sheer physical charm for her was as strong as ever. The very night after her conversation with the mate, he came in just as she had settled the baby in his

crib, and took her confidently in his arms.

She stiffened for a moment, and then relaxed against him, conquered without even a struggle. As he would have lifted her on to the bottom bunk she drew back. "Not there!" she muttered, and climbed to the upper berth.

"You've hurt your hand, darling," he said, noticing for the first time the swollen bruise as she gripped the edge of the bunk.

"It's nothing," she said dully. "I knocked it on something . . ."

She lay and stared past his head, while Brenton wondered briefly what was wrong with her tonight. He concluded that she had not properly recovered from the birth of the baby. She would come good again later. He eased on to his side and put his face in the hollow of her shoulder, and was soon contentedly asleep. Delie stayed awake, staring into the darkness until it was time for the baby's next feed.

Twelve months later another boy was born; and in less than two years after that there was a third.

"Three sons!" said Delie, folding napkins late at night on the ~~wooden~~ table. "Four, if you count the one that—that didn't live. I feel as if I were Lady Macbeth, and you had said 'Bring forth men children only!' Oh, I'm so tired of having babies!"

"I would like a daughter," said Brenton obstinately. "A daughter to look after me in my old age——"

"She'd more likely marry and go off to the other side of the world. But really, we *can't* have any more, there just isn't room."

"I know, but there doesn't seem much we can do about it, does there? I mean whatever we do doesn't seem to ~~do much~~."

"We could try separate cabins. *That* would be infallible."

He looked at her quizzically, and she tried to keep a steely glint in her eye; but he put out one hand and drew her to him, and soon she felt the old delicious warmth and weakness stealing through her. It was no use.

"We'll just have to be very careful," she said feebly.

"Mah-mee! Dordie wanna drinkawater," came from the cabin

next door which had long become the nursery. At the same time the baby in the crib by her bunk gave an irritable coughing cry, was silent for a second, and then began a full-voiced wailing.

"There's one thing," she said, detaching herself from Brenton's arms. "There soon won't be *time* to start another."

She gave the baby a dummy and took a drink of water to Gordon, but by the time she got there he had fallen asleep again. Little Brenny opened his eyes at the candle, blinking his long lashes and scowling. She felt Gordon's brow under the soft silk of his fair curls. It was damp and hot. She drew off one of his blankets, kissed Brenny lightly and went out. Gordon had nightmares if he became too hot, would wake screaming and could not be soothed for half an hour. She walked to the rail and looked at the peaceful night.

They were tied up at Overland Corner, below the high limestone cliffs in which were the fossils of molluscs that lived in the warm Cretaceous sea that once covered the valley of the lower Murray. The run was now between Wentworth and Morgan, at the Northwest Bend, where the Murray made a great right-angled turn, its first major change of direction, and began to flow steadily southward to meet the sea.

The river was so low that it was dangerous to travel at night. The water slipped silently past below the deck, the Pointers of the Southern Cross and the bright star Canopus reflected on its calm surface. Delie stared at the dark water and then up at the great starlit sky, remembering how she had gone outside with Adam at Kiandra and seen the Cross sparkling in the frosty night.

It was all the same, all unchanged, yet here she was away down the river where the current began to slow; here was she, twenty-nine ~~years~~ old, she would be thirty in no time—thirty! And what had she done? With three little children, a baby only six months old, what could she do?

Her painting was almost at a standstill. Ideas for pictures, compositions, canvases more ambitious than she had ever attempted, swam all about her in the air. She felt the immense dry continent, the slow burning summer, the pure skies in all her veins, and longed to translate them into paint, to get her vision

of this great southern land down on canvas before it faded and was lost. But there was no time, and there was no escape.

There were days when the promise of the morning, when the way the thin streamers of cloud were swept across the blue as though by a giant brush dipped in flake white, filled her with a sweet unrest. She felt a longing for paint and canvas that was physical in its intensity. Then came the first waking cry of the baby, and the deadening, deadly round of domestic chores began, to end only when she fell into her bunk long after sunset, too tired for anything but sleep.

Somewhere behind her she seemed to hear a giant key turning in a lock. Like so many others, like her own father perhaps, who had always longed to travel, she had gone joyfully, willingly, with wide-open eyes, into the trap so cunningly set, so deliciously baited, by Nature; and too late had heard the iron door clang shut.

The decks were now enclosed with wire-netting to a height of nearly three feet; but Gordon, now almost four, was beginning to climb everywhere. He was fair, slender, active and nervous; ~~with~~ Brenton's firm chin and nose showing even through the baby fat, but with his mother's eyes: larger, softer, more deeply blue than Brenton's had ever been.

Little Brenny had brown curls and eyes like his father's: bright, sea-blue, straight-gazing and unimaginative. He was very little trouble. The baby, Alex, was delicate, with a chronic cough that kept him from sleeping soundly. Delie rocked him sometimes by the hour, dozing upright from weariness. The doctors could do nothing for him. It was a congenital weakness, they said.

Every month or so he developed bronchitis, ran a temperature for a week, and had to be nursed night and day. Delie, dreading pneumonia, wondered if he would survive childhood, or join the little unnamed brother in a lonely riverside grave. She thought sometimes of the woman she had never known, the mother who had buried her three children in the sandhill grave above Echuca.

She had a new sympathy now for that unhappy woman. Was there anything more terrible to a mother than the death of a child?

Ben was a wonderful help. He would carry the ailing baby about, and keep young Brenny amused. Gordon followed his father everywhere, helped to hold the big wheel, and hung on so tight that he was lifted in the air by the spokes. His father had begun to take an interest in him as soon as he could walk, and was teaching him to swim.

In the mornings, Brenton came crashing down from his bunk—he never moved quietly, however tired Delie might be—and she heard the splash as he dived overboard. In a few minutes he would be calling for Gordon, and she didn't want him to wake the others. She dragged herself from her bunk and went to call Gordon. His bed was soaked; she could smell its steamy, ammoniated reek.

"Gordie!" she whispered. "Daddy's in the river already. Are you coming for your swimming lesson?"

"Yes-es, Mummy." Gordon sat up and looked rather scared. She lifted him down and he struggled out of his wet pyjamas. She helped him put on a little pair of drawers. His fair hair, ~~stuck~~ end, his eyes were sleepy, and one cheek was brightly flushed.

There were noises coming from the galley now. The fireman could be heard stirring the firebox, throwing in logs.

She took Gordon down to the bottom deck and lifted him over the netting. Brenton, swimming effortlessly alongside, called, "Jump, Gordie!"

Gordon hesitated and shrank back, shivering.

"Come on! Jump, I say." His brows drew down as he waited, ~~treading~~ water. "If you don't jump before I count three, I'll come out and throw you in. I don't like cowards. Now, one—two——"

Gordon, one fear overcoming the other, jumped. Delie let out her breath with relief. He would be quite happy by the time he came out; but he was a nervous child, and she thought his nightmares had something to do with his swimming lessons.

When young Brenny turned three, his father began to teach

him too. The difference in the two children was apparent at once. Brennie took to the water like a duck.

He too had his father's chin, besides his short, determined nose. When he once made up his mind to do something, nothing would stop him. He jumped fearlessly every time, would have jumped from the top of the wheel-house if his father told him to. Soon he was like a fish in the water, and could swim faster than Gordon.

"He'll make a champion one day," said Brenton proudly.

Their headquarters were now at Morgan, known more often as the Northwest Bend, or just The Bend. Morgan was an ugly town, with buildings of staring stone and corrugated iron strung along a bare rocky cliff; no trees, no gardens, and a hot north wind usually driving the white dust through the gritty main street in summer.

Yet the river, away from the busy wharf where the trains from Adelaide delivered and picked up goods, still kept its ancient charm. The green, translucent water flowed steadily past the yellow cliffs, while gum-trees grew from the water's edge—not in a continuous wall as in the upper reaches, but in isolated majesty, each one leaning towards its reflection in an attitude of contemplation.

Jim Pearce had got his master's certificate and left to command a steamer of his own. Charlie McBean was still with them as engineer. Young Ben was reading for his mate's ticket.

He did not have to navigate by the stars, or shoot the sun to get a position; but he had to be able to carry the whole river-system like a map inside his head. He might be asked questions on more than 3,000 miles of winding channels; he would be examined on the Wakool, the Edwards, the Murrumbidgee and the Darling, even though he never intended steaming out of the Murray river.

He had to know the height of the lift-bridges at high river, the shape of the Murray at Pollard's Cutting, the depth of water by the wharf at Goolwa, and the width between the pillars of the bridge at Echuca, a thousand miles upstream.

"Ben, are you sure this is what you're really meant for?" asked Delie one day, finding him wrinkling his brows over the forty-foot chart from the wheel-house. "You've got brains, you should sit for a scholarship and you might get to the University."

"It would be years before I was earnin' anything, Miss Delie," said Ben, looking surprised.

"Well, what matter? You're not thinking of getting married, are you, Ben?"

He flushed. "No, it's not that. But I don't know—I don't fancy leavin' the river, somehow." His shy dark eyes looked at her warmly a moment.

Something of what he meant was conveyed in his look: I wouldn't think of leaving the river because it would mean leaving you.

Delie blushed slightly and bent over the baby, who was picking at the pitch between the planking of the deck. His cough had gradually improved, and he was rapidly putting on weight. She could not forget that Ben had delivered her first child; it was an intimate bond between them.

She began to crawl about the deck, growling like a bear. The baby laughed delightedly. Ben flopped down on his knees beside her. They growled and crawled and hid behind crates and barrels, while Alex crawled after them. The eight years between the two adults seemed to fall away.

Brenny came trotting along the deck, bellowing. His face was scarlet, his mouth open to its widest extent.

"What's the matter, 'dear?" Delie took one of the fists from his eyes and stroked it, but he struck her hand away and roared on.

"Tell me what's the matter!" She felt her own rage rise to meet his. She could not be calm and patient for more than a minute, and the noise was shattering.

Gordon came sidling along the deck against the cabins.

"Gordon, come here! Did you hurt Brenny?"

"No! He's mad."

"Dordie hurt me. Dordie bung my yedd. Wah-wah-wah!"

Delie flew at Gordon and slapped him, venting her irritation with the roaring Brenton. Gordon yelled, and the baby, upset by

the sudden change of atmosphere when he had been having a lovely time, began to scream. Ben picked him up, but Delie ran to the other side of the deck, covering her ears.

She would have liked to begin screaming too. The noise scraped her nerves, exacerbated by lack of sleep. On that side was a lovely yellow cliff—the place was known as Broken Cliffs, and three great angular boulders had crashed down and lay half out of the olive-green water. Her fingers ached for the brush; a fierce longing to paint swept over her.

She closed her eyes, took a deep breath, and went down to the galley to prepare the baby's feed. Thank God, she thought, thank God they were all getting older, and in perhaps three years she would have them all out of napkins. For once she wanted Time to flow swiftly, to bear her forward out of her present bondage.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

~~Between~~ Between the high yellow cliffs the air was breathlessly still. The river drowsed in the heat, seeming not to move. Small lizards lay basking on spits of white sand, unmarked except for the tiny tracery of their feet.

Huge motionless clouds, white and solid-looking as marble, were massed round the horizon, and far up in the burning blue, directly above the *Philadelphia's* deck, two wedge-tailed eagles circled, like cinders rising in the hot currents of air over the baking land.

Sweat poured from the crew as they 'walked' a load of firewood on board from the pile below the Lyrup village settlement. Teddy Edwards would not wait while they had a dip to cool off. They must swim in the early morning, or when the boat was moving, as he did. When they started again one of the younger deck-hands, who had climbed down into the dingy, let himself over the stern on a rope for a quick swish through the luke-warm water.

The skipper stood in the wheel-house, bare-footed, wearing only a pair of cotton-duck trousers. He wiped at his moisture-beaded upper lip with his wrist.

"Take the wheel, will you, Ben?" he said to the lad. "I'm going in."

The mate was off duty, resting in the little cabin that had been built aft for the mate and the engineer since the skipper's family expanded.

He throttled back the engine to half-speed, and dived neatly from the top of the paddle-box. He came up, caught the rudder as it went past, climbed up it, and walked lightly back along the deck, cooled and exhilarated. The caress of the deep water had filled him with recklessness and daring.

He did not climb to the top of the paddle-box again, but vaulted the wire and stood poised on the deck just in front of the great wheel.

Delie, who was feeding the baby on deck to get some of the breeze of their movement, saw him and leapt to her feet. "Wait!" she cried. She had noticed how his figure was thickening lately; he was putting on weight, there were some grey strands among his golden curls. And he still thought he could do his boyish tricks.

"Not under the wheel, darling! Please, Brenton, don't."

With a brief wave and a flash of white teeth he turned, filling his lungs deeply, and dived clean beneath the thundering paddles. Delie closed her eyes for the space of twelve heart-beats. When she opened them again his head was bobbing in the wake.

He swam diagonally to the shore, ran swiftly along the bank, leaping roots and fallen trees, and swam out ahead of the boat to meet her and climb up the rudder as before.

Delie was furious. The reaction from her fear of a moment ago left her trembling.

"How can you!" she cried as he came past to the wheel-house steps, all dripping as he was, his eyes washed to a clear blue, almost green. "If you don't care for my feelings, you might remember that you've a family to support. Showing off like a boy of ten! You haven't the figure for it any more," she added

unkindly, "and if you ge killed, what will become of us all?"

He stopped dead and looked down at her as she waved the baby's bottle vehemently before his face. Pride and anger sparkled in his eyes. His chin was raised in the old arrogant way, as he looked down his straight nose at her. She would have given anything to take back her words.

"Is that so?" he said distinctly. "Well, just to show you, I'll do it again."

Without another look at her he retreated to the bottom deck, vaulted the wire and dived in front of the wheel. There was a momentary check in the regular *chunk! chunk! chunk!* and then he was spewed out behind, to float lifelessly in the curling wake.

Delie dumped the baby on the deck and ran up the three steps to the wheel-house. In a moment the scream of the whistle was echoing the silent scream in her mind. They could not stop suddenly without letting off some steam. She helped Ben drag the wheel round. The *Philadelphia* cut her own wake, the dinghy was cast off and Brenton's inert form was hauled aboard.

He was not mangled or crushed, but there was a terrifying dent in the base of his skull. Delie put her head down against his bare, wet breast, and heard the faint beating of his heart.

"He's alive!" she cried, tears of thankfulness pouring down her bloodless face. "Help me get him to the after-cabin—we mustn't move him more than we can help." Gordon appeared beside her, looking scared and tearful. "Gordie, go and see to the baby. Don't wake Brenny. Daddy's been hurt, but it's all right."

She packed hot-water bottles around Brenton and dribbled some hot brandy between his bluish lips. She could only keep him warm and quiet until they reached medical aid at Remark.

Charlie McBean came up, his fierce blue eyes under their wild eyebrows softened with the moisture of strong emotion.

"I'm givin' 'er every inch of steam I can, Missus, without blowin' up," he said. "Teddy was a good skipper; one of the best."

"Not *was*; is," she said quickly. "He's not dead. He's not going to die."

'He's not going to die, he's not, he's not,' she told herself. If she said it often enough it must come true.

While Brenton lay in the Renmark Hospital, another skipper took over the *Philadelphia*. Delie and her children had to board in the town. Whenever she could she hurried to the hospital. The landlady, taking pity on her, offered to mind the baby while she went out.

"Leave 'im with me, love," she said comfortably, tucking a wisp of yellowish-grey hair into place. Her skin was raddled, her eyes were pouchy with what had probably been a pretty dissolute life, but her heart was kind.

For ten days Brenton did not recover consciousness. Concussion and shock, she was told; and there might be some permanent injury to the brain. There was no way of telling until he came round.

"You must be prepared," said the doctor, "to find that he can't speak, or is perhaps paralysed on one side."

On the eleventh day she found him conscious, lying quite flat and still, his head bandaged. The bright sea-blue of his eyes seemed to have clouded over; but he smiled faintly.

"Delie, Delie!" he muttered. "I'm . . . sorry."

"You needn't be sorry, darling!" She was on her knees by the bed, trying to keep back her tears. She smoothed his springy curls where they twined round the bandage. "As long as you've come back to us."

"My . . . right arm. Can't move it. I'm . . . finished."

She gripped his good arm urgently. "No! You're going to get better. Here's Gordon, see! And Brenny . . ."

He turned a bitter, brooding look upon his sons, and rolled his head impatiently upon the pillow. Was there a slight distortion at one side of his mouth? And his speech seemed slurred . . . But his brain was clear enough.

A starched rustling behind her, and a nurse put a hand on her arm. "You mustn't tire him, Mrs. Edwards. That will be enough for today."

As the slow weeks went by he gradually improved. Feeling returned first to his fingers, then to the whole of his right arm. His skull had not been fractured—he must have a particularly strong one, the doctors said—but he suffered for a while from severe headaches.

Delie was beginning to get used to a life ashore. She faced the fact that Brenton might never skipper another boat. She had a new worry that she dared not tell him in his present state.

And what if Brenton never recovered fully? With a helpless, dependent husband, how was she to provide for a family of young children? She could not have another!

In her panic and loneliness she thought of the kindly but hard-faced Mrs. Patchett, the landlady—a courtesy 'Mrs.' surely, for there was no mention of a Mr. Patchett, though a 'gentleman friend' came in three nights a week to drink gin with her and play poker.

But she could not bring herself to speak to the landlady. Mrs. Patchett, she felt sure, would know something that could be done about these things, had perhaps helped plenty of other women in the same predicament. Apparently Mrs. Patchett guessed her thoughts; for one day when she was in the kitchen preparing the baby's dinner, the landlady looked at her pale face, then at her figure, and said, "Been off yer food a bit lately, love."

Delie flushed slightly, pretending not to hear.

"Not eatin' yer breakfast, like. You weaned the baby, 'aven't yer?"

"Yes. He's eleven months old."

"M'm." She chopped away at some onion on a board, with swift, sharp chops, holding the knife lengthwise in her pudgy, ringed hands. "That's the time when yer wanten watch it, when you've just weaned 'em."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"Don't want to go startin' no more just now, I s'pose, with yer 'usband sick, and all."

"No," said Delie in a choked voice.

"If yer ever want any help, like . . . as one woman to another,

I've got a friend could fix you up easy. Qn'y cost yer a fiver." Chop, chop, chop went the knife.

"Thank you. But I don't want any help."

Grasping the plate of warmed food, she hurried out of the kitchen with burning cheeks.

She knew what Mrs. Patchett meant by 'help', and that the 'friend' was probably the gentleman caller. At the thought of his black finger-nails and greasy collar, she shuddered.

That night she looked up an advertisement inside the pink cover of a well-known journal. It looked promising:

LADIES! WORRIED RE HEALTH

Take my special triple-strength pills for all cases of irregularity. Even most obstinate cases yield to treatment. Send only One Pound.

One pound seemed a terribly large sum to Delie, but she sent off a money order and waited nervously for the parcel to arrive. The pills looked innocuous enough, but even their triple-strength action did no good. They made her feel violently ill, but had no other result than to leave her pale and exhausted.

She dragged herself to the hospital, leaving Brenny, who had a bronchial cold, in charge of Gordon in their room, and the baby with Mrs. Patchett. She found Brenton so much better that he would be able to be moved the next day, and it was just as well.

She could hear the noise as soon as she opened the front door of the boarding-house. Mrs. Patchett and the gentleman-friend were singing, loudly and drunkenly:

"Oh don't you remember Black Alice, Ben Bolt,
Black Alice so dusky and dark,
That Warrego gin with a straw through her nose,
And teeth like a Moreton Bay shark?"

The baby was wailing in a drowsy, exhausted fashion, Brenny was coughing and crying as if he would choke, and Gordon was chanting loudly, "Shut up, shut up, shut up. . . ."

Delie rushed upstairs, picked up the scarlet-faced Brenny and soothed him, while scolding Gordon for not looking after him better.

"He was teasing me," said Gordon sullenly. "He was asking for it. I only slapped him."

"You come with me," she said, putting Brenny down and taking Gordon's hand firmly. "The baby's crying, and I don't think Mrs. Patchett can hear him."

Downstairs, she knocked on the parlour door marked 'Private', but the knock was lost in the noise within. She opened the door and saw Mrs. Patchett, her dirty blouse undone, her hair falling down, leaning back against the wall and singing. A half-empty gin bottle was on the table. The 'gentleman friend' was singing loudly, waving his glass in time: "Oh, don't you remember . . ."

"Wait there, Gordon." She shut the door quickly, leaving him outside. She snatched up the wailing baby, which seemed strangely inert and unaware of her. At the first movement it vomited slightly, and Delie smelt its spirit-laden breath.

"Mrs. Patchett! You've been giving the baby gin!"

Mrs. Patchett stopped singing, hiccuped solemnly, and stared at her own red-eyed.

"Jus' a li'l drop, love. No 'arm in that. Lapped it up, 'e did, the li'l lamb. Makes 'im sleep better."

"Oh, don't you remember——" warbled the friend.

"He's not asleep; he's been crying. I could hear him from the front door." She was so angry that her legs trembled and felt weak.

"Don't you worry, love——"

She left the room abruptly, resolving that she would leave the boarding-house too as soon as possible.

Brenton had quite recovered the use of his arm, though he walked with a slight limp, dragging his right leg. His speech was clear again, but his eyes had lost for ever a little of their youthful brilliance, and the grey was spreading in his hair.

He had put on weight while lying helpless. His waistline had thickened further, there was a suggestion of *embonpoint* in front,

and a heavy crease ran round the back of his neck. There was a faint blurring of all his well-cut features, as in a picture out of focus.

"Ah, it's good to be back in a real bed again, with you," he said on the first night after he left hospital. He stretched his great bulk comfortably, and looked at her with the old smile in his eyes.

"It's wonderful to have you back." Her lips trembled. He wound a strand of her dark hair about his wrist.

"And how wonderful it'll be to get back to the river! I felt stifled in that hospital. Everything standing still. Have you noticed how a boat's always alive, even when she's tied up? The river-reflections on the woodwork, the bit of a creak as the wind or the current catches her——"

Delie sighed and bit her lip. "The trouble is, there's really not enough room on a boat. I mean, when we have another baby . . . Oh, Brenton!" She flung herself into his arms and wept.

"So that's how it is?" He whistled tunelessly for a moment. "Gosh, I don't know, Del. You'll have to come with me. It's much cheaper when we all live aboard."

The baby Alex began to cry, wakened by the mosquitoes feeding on his tender cheeks. "Can't you stop him?" cried Brenton. "God, I can't stand that row."

Delie started up guiltily. Since his accident Brenton had become abnormally sensitive to noise; the baby had scarcely made a sound yet. She picked him up and carried him round the room.

Brenton, who had been down at the wharf yarning with the skipper of a steamer that had just come in, came hurrying back to the boarding-house, moving his dragging right leg impatiently forward with a hand behind his thigh.

He had been talking with Captain Ritchie of the *Mannum*, the little steamer that was supposed to be built to cross a grass flat on a heavy dew. She was fitted out as a trading vessel, with a counter over which goods were sold, from dress materials to rifles, from sewing-needles to pumping-machinery. Such things were scarce along the river away from the towns, and he was doing very well.

The old River Murray Navigating Company was going to be turned into a limited company, and Captain Hugh King was drawing out, and retiring from the rivers.

"Our contract was with the old company," said Brenton, "and we're pulling out too. Hughie King was such a decent old cove, and such a gentleman to deal with, that I didn't mind being under contract to him, but I don't know this new crowd. We'll turn the *Philadelphia* into a floating store, and make a fortune."

Delie looked sceptical.

"And no deck-hands needed for lumping cargo; even a mate won't be necessary when we can tie up overnight while I have a sleep. That will leave more room for the family. But you'll have to pull your weight, too. No cook——"

"No cook! Oh, Brenton! Couldn't I be deck-hand or mate? I should learn to run the boat in case you got ill. I don't mind hard work, I can help you tie up and take a turn at the wheel—you said yourself I was getting quite good." Her eyes were eager and pleading, too large in her pale face. She hadn't the blooming look that went with her first pregnancy.

He chewed his lip, looking at her down his nose. "You aren't strong enough. And besides, in your condition, you won't be fit soon for jumping ashore and all those capers."

"I don't intend ever to get in this condition again."

"Well . . . I suppose it'll be different in six months. But then you'll have your hands full with the new baby. There's no harm in you studying for your mate's ticket, though. I don't know as there's ever been a woman registered as a skipper on the river, but there's no reason why you shouldn't be the first.

"Come up to the wheel-house when I'm steering, and I'll start learning you the channel. Now, what's the greatest depth of water ever found over the Christmas Rocks above Wilcannia?"

Delie looked crestfallen. "But that's in the Darling. I don't know the Darling."

"There's an awful lot you don't know. You'll have to be able to answer questions on any of the rivers. I'll draw you a chart of 'em later. And Ben can coach you a bit too."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Brenton was steering, the baby slept, and Delie was in the wheel-house learning the channel; but she was not being taught much, for the *South Australian* was chasing them. Soon the bigger boat steered past them up-river, with jeers from her fireman and engineer, and derisive toots on her whistle.

Teddy Edwards seemed to see red. His jaw became rigid, his mouth set, and the vein stood out in his neck in a frightening way as he clenched his teeth. His face, usually rather florid, became beetroot-coloured.

"What does it matter if they *do* pass us?" cried Delie. He looked as if he might have a fit or a stroke, and fall like a log at her feet. "We don't need to race."

For the *Philadelphia* was now fitted out as a floating store, and traded up-river from Morgan, through the growing irrigation settlements of Waikerie, Berri, Cobdogla and Loxton. There was enough trade for more than one boat, and a leisurely progress between lonely farms and out-stations was best for business. But Teddy and his 'batty engineer' could not at first take things quietly. The only thing he had let up on since his accident was swimming. He no longer dived in when they were going along.

Now he opened the throttle wide, and the funnel sobbed and panted with power. Charlie needed no message to tell him to throw on the last of a load of fine, straight, tinder-dry boxwood he had been saving for just such a crisis, and to weight the safety-gauge so that it couldn't blow off under 80 lb. pressure.

"She's towing two loaded barges," said Brenton tensely. "We've got no barge, and she bloody well left us standing."

They rounded a bend and began to overtake the other steamer in a long, straight reach. The river was wide here, and a strong wind was sweeping downstream, aiding the current. The much larger *South Australian* and her two barges, swinging into the wind, were slowed down at once. The *Philadelphia* soon overhauled her. Brenton steamed cheekily all round her before leaving her his wake.

When the excitement was over he turned to Delie with a look of triumph; and found, to his surprise, that she was in a towering rage.

"Left him standing!" he said, giving her an uneasy sideways look as he steered. He stood always on the left of the big wheel, while she sat on a high stool beside him, unless she was helping through a stiff bend, when she would jump down and handle the spokes from the other side, neatly and with surprising strength.

She had jumped down from the stool and crossed the wheel-house, and stared at him now across the width of the big wheel.

"Will you never grow up! Racing, just for the sake of racing, and risking all our lives! If you have no thought for me, you might at least think of the children. Don't you remember what happened to the *Providence*?"

He set his mouth, scowled, and gave an impatient twist of the head. "Of course I remember. But the *Providence* wasn't racing when she blew up. She had a faulty boiler."

"I don't care, it isn't safe! And you know what a gauge-spragger Charlie is, and you encourage him. It's not as though you had no responsibilities."

"Sir, for God's sake!"

They were steaming up a wide reach with yellow, honey-combed cliffs on one side, a reed-bordered lagoon on the other. She knew she was being unwise, but the words kept tumbling out. "It's so stupid! We passed a farmhouse back there, I saw the woman on the veranda, we should have stopped and let her see the dress materials. And when we do stop the *South Australian* will pass us anyway. I just can't see——"

"I don't like taking any man's wake," he growled. "Now shut up, and take the wheel for a bit. I'll go down and see that the gauge is all right, since you're making such a song and dance about it. Keep her on that black stump in the bight of the bend."

She crossed over the wheel-house, and taking two spokes in her hands brought the steering-pole slowly, slowly round till it cut the black stump vertically in half. There she kept the wheel steady. Sometimes she moved out of the course she had taken up, just to feel the sensation of power that came from swinging the

great boat round again, its bows cutting across the horizon.

Her anger evaporated. She loved to steer, and to be left alone in the wheel-house like this.

She let her mind fall into the dreamy, hypnotic state that the steady onward movement, the regular beat of paddles and engine lulled her into whenever she had time to relax. The boat throbbed with eager life. Onward, onward, ever onward, it chanted to her ears.

The wheel-house windows were closed. Reflections, always moving, cut across other reflections which crossed again the real scene outside. It was as if there were several layers of reality: you could fix your mind on any one, and all the others became unreal.

A sparkling sheet of water, reflected from the river behind, cut at an angle across the trees that marched steadily backward outside the window; on top of these marching trees were the reflections of other trees moving just as steadily forward. Shadow-clouds crossed real clouds, behind was before, the past came towards you while the present slipped away.

'Time,' thought Delie confusedly, 'is always there, all of it; you can travel across it in any direction if you can once free your mind of the illusion that you must move continuously from an irretrievable past into an unknowable future.'

'And doesn't the river return upon itself in endless windings, and flow back again from the sea on the currents of air, to begin all over again, endlessly? It is all there, always, in spite of its apparent movement from a fixed beginning to an appointed end. Time is a river in which our lives are only molecules of water . . .'

She could see herself faintly reflected in the windows, an insubstantial ghost through which the river gleamed and the landscape flowed. Was she real, either? Was it all an illusion, a mere arrangement of waves of light? But she felt the growing heaviness of her body, the weight of the new life within. This was real, all too real.

She was wearing the full-gathered black poplin skirt that she had worn in her last three pregnancies. It concealed the changes in her figure. A pale pink blouse set off her dark hair and

delicate complexion. She could still wear pink, for she had never tanned or freckled in spite of the open-air life.

Still Brenton did not come back. She had rounded the bend, and she didn't know the channel ahead; only that deep water was usually found on the outside of bends, and shoals on the inner curve where the river flowed more slowly. Though the *Industry* kept the river snag-free, there were tricky places where the inexperienced could easily run aground.

It was nearly time to prepare the baby's vegetables and broth. She always cooked the children's food, though they had a cook-deck-hand who was better as a hand; he was referred to by Charlie and Ben as 'The Chief Poisoner', and they kept asking each other, "Who called the cook a bastard?" and replying, "Who called the bastard a cook?"

Delie was becoming tired. Her hands sweated on the wheel, and her back ached. The nervous frown that had etched three little lines between her brows became deeply marked. Surely Brenton wouldn't risk the boat just to punish her?

A step on the deck cheered her. She called out, and Ben's head appeared.

"Let me take over. You look tired," he said tenderly. "How long have you been steering?"

"Oh, only about half an hour. I love it, really, but I don't know the channel."

He was standing beside her, and as he put out a hand to take a spoke, she moved hers to the same one ahead of him. His hand closed over hers. It tightened at once to a painful grip, squeezing her hand into the wood, while she felt his eyes fixed upon her face. She stared straight ahead, but a pink flush began to mount in her pale cheeks.

"My hand," she said distantly. "You're hurting it."

"I'm sorry." He released his grip at once. "But you're so beautiful! I—had to tell you." His voice was low, almost a whisper. Slowly he bent his dark head and kissed the hand upon the wheel. Her confusion vanished. She suddenly felt very old and wise and maternal.

"Thank you! But d'you know how old I am, Ben? I'll be thirty this year; and by the time you're thirty, I'll be forty—middle-aged. Apart from the fact that I'm married."

"I can't help it."

By now the boat, unguided, had veered towards the left bank. Ben hastily swung the wheel up and away, while looking at her with the eyes of a sensitive dog that has been rebuked.

"To me, fair friend, you never can be old," he quoted. "I've read all of Shakespeare's sonnets to the Dark Lady in the book you gave me, and they always make me think of you."

"Shall I compare thee to a summer's day
Thou art more lovely and more temperate . .

He was no longer whispering, but declaiming:

"Being your slave, what should I do but tend
Upon the hours and times of your desire?
I have no precious time at all to spend——"

"Ben! Hush! Stop this foolishness at once." But her voice was moved, gentle.

"It's not foolishness. It's my life. You—are—everything to me: mother, teacher, friend, sister, and . . . my only love."

"Ben! Please!"

Now he was kissing her arm, the hollow of her elbow beneath the rolled-up sleeve. She had felt herself beginning to be moved by his passionate voice, and now a stirring of response in her deepest feminine being told her that he was no longer a boy, but a man with a man's desires. She steeled herself to hurt him.

"Ben!" she said sharply. "I am a wife, someone else's wife, and I'm going to have another child, quite soon. His child. He's my husband, and I love him."

Even as she said it she wondered with detachment if it were still entirely true. She loved the image of Brenton as he had been, the gay, golden-haired, irresistible lover; and since he was still the same person—he was, of course he was!—she must love him still.

Ben had dropped her arm abruptly. "I'm sorry," he muttered. "I guess I forgot myself." It was his turn to flush. He glared painfully at the river, his face averted.

"I must go down to the galley and get baby's feed ready." And then more gently, sorry for his misery: "I'm sorry, Ben dear. I'm immensely touched and flattered, as any woman would be. But in a few years you'll be laughing at your present state."

"Never!" said Ben fiercely.

Delie had been more disturbed than she realised at the time. She found herself quite unconsciously recalling, with a reminiscent thrill, the touch of his hot lips on her bare arm, his hand crushing hers. She debated with herself whether to tell Brenton, but decided against it, as long as she could avoid further scenes.

She became cool and distant with Ben, but the children loved him and sought him out, and their presence kept the atmosphere natural enough between them.

But when they got down to Morgan again, and were tied up at the high wharf, Brenton told her that Ben was leaving the *Philadelphia*.

He came to her cabin to say good-bye. He stood in the door while she changed the baby's napkin, a wisp of soft dark hair falling forward over her face as she bent above the squirming, kicking child.

"Here, you might as well have them back," he said gruffly. He was holding out the volume of sonnets. "I know all the best ones off by heart."

She sat Alex on the bottom bunk, and took the open book. A black pencil line was marked by sonnet number LXXXVII:

Farewell! thou art too dear for my possessing . . .

She thought of the marked volume of Shelley she had thrown out of this window, so long ago! She put out her hand frankly, and he took it in both of his.

"It's not farewell, Ben; just *au revoir*. We'll meet again one day, when you have your own steamer."

But he was leaving the river, he told her. He had only stayed because of her; now he was going down to Port Adelaide to get a job on a deep-sea boat.

"But, Ben, you're too fine and sensitive just to be an Able Seaman. And you're so good with children, you should become a teacher. If you were to do your training——"

"Well, I might. I dunno. I've got quite a bit saved out of me pay. Never spend any on liquor or smokes." He gave the ghost of a smile. "Only books. It's thanks to you, and the books you've lent me, that I know as much as I do. You've opened up a whole new world for me."

"I'm glad about that, anyway." She withdrew her hand.

"I know I'll never forget you." He was staring at her in a mesmerised way, at her lips, and her eyes, that were so soft, so large and lustrously blue that he seemed to drown in their clear depths. "There's only one thing I want to ask of you, and I'll go away, and never ask another thing. Philadelphia! Let me——? Just one kiss. Just one."

She had meant to keep the parting brisk and businesslike, but he had taken both her hands again, and was drawing her slowly towards him. Impulsively she leaned forward, and their lips met and held for a long moment. Then he turned and stumbled out on to the deck. She did not see him again.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Not a single tributary flowed into the Murray in all its five hundred miles of wandering through this dry corner of Australia. The river, instead, flowed out into the thirsty land, sucked up by powerful steam-pumps, it flooded the irrigation settlements and orangeries that appeared like green oases among the yellow stone and burning sand.

The vines and fruit trees were just beginning to sprout with new leaves when Delie's fifth baby was born at the Waikerie hospital—a girl. Brentor was delighted with his daughter at first. But

she was a small baby, and never seemed to get enough to eat, though in desperation at her endless wailing Delie got up two or three times a night to give her extra feeds.

Because of these disturbed nights she had a wonderful view of Halley's Comet, which had returned that year trailing clouds of filmy glory across the sky. Probably no one but nurses on night duty and seamen on midnight watch had such a view of it. It spread its train right across the dark inland skies, and the stars, usually so bright in that clear air, shone mistily through a cloud of light. She gazed at the mysterious and lovely visitor, which would not come back again until after she was dead.

One night when Gordon woke with a nightmare she took him out on deck to see it, but it frightened him. He had been very nervous and subdued when she came back after ten days in which the cook and Brenton had somehow looked after the children.

He had a habit of flinging himself on to his bunk when anything upset him, and crying quietly, unnaturally, with a kind of muted moaning sound. Alex, just beginning to toddle round the decks on sturdy eighteen-month-old legs, had developed feeding difficulties, would shut his mouth obstinately and refuse to eat. He was intensely jealous of the new baby.

As her fretful wailing went on night and day, Brenton's pride in the baby turned rapidly to irritation. One night he sat up in his bunk, clutching his hair wildly, and roared, "If that kid doesn't shut up soon, I'll drop it in the river!"

He looked so mad, with the great vein swelling in his neck, his eyes distended and bloodshot, that Delie, who had slipped out of her bunk to try to hush the baby, clutched it protectively to her. 'He's not well, of course he doesn't mean it,' she thought; but the brutal words still rang in the little cabin, in the shocked, vibrating air.

Soon the baby became more lethargic, did not cry much and slept a great deal. Its skin was waxy, its head seemed unnaturally large for its thin limbs. When they got back to Waiherie after nearly a month Delie took her to the hospital.

The doctor who had delivered the child made the examination, and looked at Delie's breasts. "Malnutrition," he said briefly.

"She must go on to prepared feed at once, but she may not keep it down at first. Better leave her here for a few weeks till we get her settled on the new diet."

"Leave the baby? You mean I needn't stay to look after her?"

"No; she'll be in good hands." He looked at her shrewdly over the top of his glasses. He was a little, tubby man with a kindly, rubicund face, more like a family doctor than the head of a public hospital. The hair had all worn off the pink crown of his head, leaving a fluffy grey fringe all round. "You could do with a bit more weight yourself," he said. "You've got your hands full, eh, with bringing up three kiddies on a boat? The rest will do you good."

She explained that they would be away at least a month, but Dr. Hample waved his hand. "That's all right; we'll look after her till you get back. You won't know her once she starts to put on weight."

It was like a reprieve. Delie went back to the boat, to the blessed silence of undisturbed nights, to a less irritable Brenton, a happy Alex who thought his rival had been disposed of, and only half as many napkins to wash. Her maternal feelings were exhausted. She had begun to feel nothing but weary impatience with that wailing scrap of life.

For the first time in months she got out her paints. Some colours she had left on the palette, with the intention of using them up in some spare time that never came, had dried in hard lumps, rubbery at the core. She scraped them down with the palette knife and squeezed out fresh blobs of colour all round the edge, with a large blob of white at the top.

She still didn't know what she was going to paint, but she was filled with excitement at the feel of the tubes and brushes, the smell of the oil-paint. There was a prepared canvas ready, with a smudgy charcoal drawing on it that was now meaningless. She cleaned it down with bread and looked about her for a subject.

They were tied up just out of the town because the engineer had found a fault in the working of the water-gauge. Nothing met her eyes but the wide green river, with stark yellow cliffs on one side, and a monotonous grey-green flat of lignum and native

willow on the other. One twisted she-oak tree, black and meagre against the blue sky, showed on top of the cliffs, beside two tin boxes that were evidently the 'conveniences' attached to the local oval. They had once been painted red, which had now faded to a chalky pink.

There was nothing for it but the cliffs. Soon Delie was painting in with uncompromising realism, the ugly emblems of civilisation poised between the enduring rock and the infinite blue of the sky. The pink blocks, with their solid dark shadows on one side, made a satisfying pattern against the blue. She scratched the legend MEN and LADIES in the wet paint, remembering her Aunt Hester's comment on the first drawing she had done in Australia, of the 'little house' at Kiandra lost in a waste of snow: "Not a very delicate subject for a picture, I *must* say."

She would call it 'Equality of the Sexes' in the catalogue of her next exhibition. It was a topical subject now, and its flippancy would annoy some people. She liked to annoy people who took themselves too seriously.

Before she had finished, Gordon and Brenton came crowding round with endless questions and comments, and then Alex woke, hot and uncomfortable, from his day-time sleep. "You go to him, Gordon," she said impatiently, and went on painting. It was only when the last brush-stroke was in place that she became fully conscious of his roars of rage or distress, which had been heard with only the very surface of her mind.

Gordon came back, saying disgustedly, "He's mad. He won't stop."

She threw the brushes down guiltily and rushed to him, smeared with paint as she was.

"Fuppy bite me," wailed Alex. "Na'ty pink puppy . . ."

"All right; there's no nasty puppy now," she soothed him. "All gone, puppy." His nightmares were always of biting things, and would rival those of a man in the D.T.s for colour and diversity. He was nearly two, his distressing cough had gone, and he had a delicate milk-and-roses complexion, with black, finely-pencilled eyebrows, and grey eyes. He was not really like either of his parents.

She kissed the soft, damp curls at the back of his neck, that were like a floss of fine black silk. Some tension and conflict had been resolved in her by being able to paint again, and she felt happy in her motherhood, relaxed and content.

Brenny came in and put his face down close to his brother's, tickling the pink cheeks with his eyelashes. Alex gurgled happily. Delie drew them both into her arms and relaxed in an animal happiness, gazing at their petal-soft skin, their shining hair, their long eyelashes and wide, clear eyes. They were at their most perfect now, like buds just opened in the dew. Impossible to believe that they must decline towards baldness, wrinkles, the infirmity of old age!

She had long been obsessed with Time as a destructive agency, bearing every living thing away into nothingness; but now she began to see it as a quality inherent in things; they existed in time as much as in space. From now on she looked at everything with new eyes, seeing it under its aspect of Time, so that people's bodies seemed to waver like flames in a draught. In every old man she saw the eager youth he had been, in the grown youth the helpless infant, and in the fresh-faced girl the wrinkled wreck she might one day become.

The baby, when she saw her again, had the same tiny, delicate features and wispy black hair; but already she had changed, put on weight, her cheeks were rosy and she was happy and full of life.

"She's putting on twelve ounces a week now," said the matron proudly. "You can just about see her growing."

That was exactly what Delie could see; but she saw her growing into a little, wizened, grey-haired old woman.

She had chosen the name of Mignon for her, but Brenton objected; he wanted 'something plain'. They compromised by christening her Mignon but calling her Meg for short. Alex, now that he could hold the bottle and help with feeding her, had forgotten his former jealousy, and Brenton began to like her now that she did not cry.

'I wouldn't mind having babies if they weren't such messy

things,' thought Delie, as she cleaned the bright yellow filth from the second dirty napkin in one day. At least there was plenty of water available, but she still shuddered at the pollution of the great river that their human life upon it involved.

Yet the river purified itself in its endless flowing, as Time absorbed the events of history in its stream, but was never saturated; bearing away all the noisy complications and struggles of life into an eternal silence.

Brenton was reading the report of the Interstate Premiers' Conference of 1911. Occasionally he muttered aloud or jerked the paper irritably.

"'No river in the world lends itself so easily to locking,'" he read, "'and only a fraction of the present flow of water would then be needed to keep the river permanently navigable.' Bah! They knew all that before, but still they did nothing. If only the S.A. Government would make a beginning, the others might follow."

The South Australian Government, he read, was prepared to act on its own in building a series of locks to make the river permanently navigable as far up as Wentworth. An inter-State agreement was necessary because locks No. 7 to 11 would be over the border. The conference had ratified the 1907 agreement by which S.A. could use Lake Victoria, in New South Wales, as a storage basin. Work on this was "to be begun at once, at an estimated cost of £200,000".

He flung the paper away from him

"'At once!' That's good. They still won't do anything. The first conference on locking the river was held in 1872, and now, forty years later, nothing has been done. If only they had some river men in Parliament!"

"Why don't you stand yourself?" asked Delie half-jokingly.

"And so I should!" Brenton got up and strode round the small saloon, kicked the paper savagely, and roared, "By God! Do they have to wait for another drought like '02? Wasn't that enough to show them? But if there's another drought now, it won't be only the steamer-trade that'll suffer, and a few grape-

growers. There 're thousands of holdings depending on irrigation now, right along the lower river. They'll all be ruined; and what a howl there'll be when all the work and money that's gone into establishing orchards and vineyards is thrown down the drain. But these hot-air merchants do nothing but talk."

Delie soothed him down, for she was frightened for him in these violent moods. The children had learned to keep away from him, or to stay very quiet, when the vein stood out in his neck and his blue eyes became bloodshot and savage. His temper was more uncertain as the months went by. At his hasty, lurching step they shrank together and turned their eyes uneasily to their mother.

Only with little Meg he was always gentle, now that she no longer wailed. She was a bonny, laughing toddler now, with her mother's dark hair and Brenton's green-blue eyes.

'If only she'd been born first,' thought Delie, 'she'd have been a help to me before very long, which Gordon will never be.'

Yet Gordon was her favourite; shy, dreamy Gordon, with bright golden curls like his father's had been, and large blue eyes shadowed with long lashes like a girl's.

Delie always tried to be impartial, and to hide her feeling for her eldest son; but little Meg was openly her father's favourite. She could take liberties with him that none of the others dared. She would chuckle and look up at him with her merry blue eyes, trying to climb his trouser-leg as if he were a tree growing far above her head, and he would bend down and swing her up on his shoulder.

Young Brenny was his shadow, copying everything his father did with slavish admiration, mixed with awe. Alex quietly kept out of his way as much as possible. He usually had a fold of his mother's skirts in his hand, and peeped out from their safety at the big man. Gordon, shy and faintly hostile, avoided him too.

"You like Gordie better than me, don't you?" said young Brenny conversationally to his mother.

"I love you all, darling."

"It doesn't matter, though," said Brenny, brushing aside her red herring, "because Daddy likes me best. I'm braver than

Gordie. I can just about lick him now, and I can swim faster. I wish he'd stop growing until I was biggest."

"Never mind, dear, you'll catch up one day. When you're eighteen you might be taller than Gordon even, and he'll have stopped growing by then."

"Will he? Then I'll be able to fight him."

"Oh, stop talking about fighting," she said wearily.

Gordon was six this year, and she would have to start teaching him to write and do sums. Already he knew his letters and could read the simple primers she had bought for him.

Gordon loved his lessons. He had, first of all, his mother's undivided attention; he loved the smell of her hair as she bent her head low beside his, and the feel of her fingers as she held his hand and guided the pencil.

Then the colours, clear and primitive, in the first Reader were lovely too; the yellow cat sitting on a bright pink mat with yellow fringes, the red cricket ball, the yellow bat, the blue top. And he would be happy for an hour at a time with a box of coloured crayons and some shelf-paper, making up patterns or pictures of birds like curly letter V's flying over a hill.

He knew there were hills, and how to draw them, from picture-books, though he had never seen one. In his young life he had travelled thousands of miles along a river that flowed endlessly through a great plain. He had seen nothing but flat-topped cliffs or low sand-dunes. Hills were high and round, he knew, and mountains were high and pointy. He knew there were such things, and that somewhere there was a great spread-out water without any banks, called The Sea.

"Away up where the river begins," Mummy would tell him, "there are big blue mountains with their tops covered in snow. The snow melts in spring and comes down the river, and some is flowing underneath our boat now; it has taken nearly two months to get here."

And Gordon would look over the side in the blazing summer day, at the water sliding quietly in the shadow of the boat. It was greeny-coloured, like glass, only you couldn't see through it properly; and it looked cool but he knew it wasn't really, because

when Mummy or Daddy took him for a swim (and he was always afraid that Something might come up from a deep hole and grab his foot; once a weed had wrapped itself round his leg, and he had screamed) it was quite warm on top, with queer cold patches here and there. On a calm day it glittered like glass, and you could see everything double like in a mirror; but on windy days it got rough and dirty-looking, with froth like old soap-suds on the top.

He was learning to row the dinghy, which was great fun, only one oar *would* go much better than the other. If only they would both go as well as the one he would get on very fast. He always went along the set-lines in the morning, if they'd had lines out overnight, but he didn't like taking the live fish off the hooks very much; all the same, it was exciting when there was a good haul, and they could have cod or callop for breakfast.

Brenny always wanted to come too, but then he would want to row, and in the end Gordon would have to push him hard, and then he would yell and Dad would get wild. So he usually tried to sneak out early, without waking Brenny in the bunk below. Brenny could swim better than he could, and was not frightened to dive off the deck; but Gordon was determined that *he* was going to be the best rower.

They had been trading yesterday at the Lyrup Village Settlement, and this morning they were tied up at the cliffs below the great Lyrup bend. Last night Mum had taken him to the top of the cliffs and showed him the fossil shells in the limestone, from the time when all this part of the world had been under the sea.

Across the river was a wide lagoon, dotted with clumps of reeds which showed that it was not very deep. Beyond the lagoon were more cliffs in which he could see mysterious caves, black and shadowed. It was very early, the sun was not even up yet, and they would not be leaving until after breakfast.

Gordon rowed as quietly as he could. He didn't want another soul to be awake, he wanted the whole great sweep of river to belong to him alone, him and the big white crane that stood fishing at the edge of the lagoon. Sky and river were bright with the dawn, but without any pink colour, for there was not a wisp of cloud anywhere. It was like sailing through a great bowl of light.

The trees upside-down in the water, standing in the still lagoon, looked as real as the ones above; and as he drew away from the boat he saw another boat upside-down below it. A fish leaped, and a spreading circle of rings cut through the boat-image, and wobbled and broke it into pieces. But the pieces began to touch, to join, and soon it was whole again. It was like magic.

He looked over his shoulder and fixed a big tree to row towards, but he kept bumping into reeds and getting his oars tangled. The sun was already up, and there was blue smoke going up from the galley chimney, before he reached the cliffs. And then the biggest cave was only a hollow in the yellow rock. Although he was frightened of tiger-snakes in the thick swampy grass, he got out and clambered up to it. It was only just big enough for him to get into, after all.

As he ran back to the dinghy something rustled its way through the grass, and he bolted. As he pushed off he could already hear himself telling the others how he had explored and found a cave, and nearly trodden on a tiger-snake: "I'm not sure it was a tiger, but I'm pretty sure . . ."

There were sounds of activity from the boat, floating across the still water: a clatter of dishes, a bucket of rubbish being emptied into the river, the clang of the firebox door. They must be getting ready to leave! He tried to row faster, dug too deeply and nearly lost an oar. Then he got wedged on a clump of reeds.

He found that it was quicker to stand up and punt with one oar. With one last wild push he sent the dinghy out into the main stream, but overbalanced and had to grab the side of the boat to save himself. He let go of the oar. It went floating gently down the river.

At first he tried to reach it with the other oar, but he was afraid he might lose that too; then he heard unintelligible yells and shouts from the *Philadelphia*, and saw his mother and father leaning over the rail, so he thought he'd better make for the boat.

It was very awkward with one oar, and he kept turning in circles, but he drew gradually nearer. Soon he was near enough to see that Daddy was furious; the vein was standing out in his

neck, his face was red; while Mummy looked pale and worried. Brenny was watching too, which made it worse.

"Why didn't you get the other oar, you bloody little fool?" roared his father.

"It was floating too fast, and I thought you were calling to me to leave it."

He splashed and floundered miserably, bringing the dinghy at last up to the stern.

"It's lucky there's no wind, or you'd never have got back at all," said his mother. "You must never go out like that without asking, do you hear? I've been worried to death." Her voice, too, was sharp and angry.

"We've had steam up half an hour, waiting for you," growled his father, as he made the dinghy's rope fast. Gordon clambered up the rudder, only to be knocked flat on the deck by a stinging blow on the ear. "And I hope that'll learn you. Now get into your bunk and stay there."

Gordon crept up the steps, holding his ear, with a white face and tearful eyes; but he did not allow a sound to escape him until he was in his bunk in the dim cabin.

When Delie came in a little while later with some hot breakfast she had saved for him, he turned his face to the wall and would not look at it.

"Never mind, dear," she whispered. "It doesn't matter about the old oar, as long as you got back safely. Dad can easily make a new one." She put a gentle hand on his shoulder, but he shook it off fiercely. She left the tray beside him, thinking that the smell of the food would soon have its effect, for he loved Johnny-cakes and bacon. But when she went to tell him in the middle of the morning that he was allowed to get up now, the food was still not touched.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Survey work on the Lake Victoria storage brought new life to the lonely south-west corner of New South Wales, just over

the border from an arid and unpopulated part of South Australia.

Set among orange sandhills and low cliffs of red clay, the shallow lake had to be built up and strengthened. It had a naturally sealed bottom of fine impervious clay, and an inlet from the Murray along Frenchman's Creek. Regulator gates were to be installed at the end of this and on Rufus Creek, the lake's outlet back into the river.

But a war was to interrupt construction so that the lake could not be used for storage for another six years.

"They haven't even begun work on the first lock yet," said Brenton, "and until No. 9 lock is built to divert water into the lake, and the regulator gates are finished, what's the use of surveys and embankments?"

"I suppose they've got to begin somewhere," said Delie.

"Then they should begin with the locks. You'll see; they'll be caught by another drought before they do anything."

There was a surveyors' camp on the south-western shore of the lake, near the outlet of the Rufus, and Brenton had the idea of running stores and whisky to the camp. The men had nowhere to spend their money and it was burning holes in their pockets. There was no liquor at the camp.

"And no women, either," he said meaningly. "Don't you get off the boat while we're tied up there. We don't want any trouble."

"I can look after myself, thank you."

Only a small steamer like the *Philadelphia* could make its way through the narrow, wooded, winding Rufus to where the road bridge crossed it at the lake outlet, eight miles from the Murray. Wentworth was sixty miles away along a rough bush track.

The men from the camp, whose tents were set up in the angle between the creek and the lake shore, found plenty of things they needed among the stores. They crowded on board to lean over the long counter that had been built into a store-room up for'ard, where once the extra cargo used to be stacked. Fishing-tackle, matches, tobacco, lanterns, lamp-glasses, flannel shirts, tinned fruit and jam, all changed hands rapidly.

Delie was well aware that she was a centre of attraction as she moved about the store-room, handing goods to Brenton from the shelves, helping him to find things that had been stored out of sight.

The men eyed her admiringly, yearningly, sentimentally, or appraisingly; none of them was indifferent. In this male outpost she was Woman, a symbol of all that was lacking in their lives.

A young surveyor's assistant, lean and brown-faced, called her over to ask if she had any wool to match the pullover he wore. He twisted round to show her a large tear with unravelled edges in the shoulder.

She began looking through the skeins of royal-blue wool, glad of the occupation and the excuse for bending over that it gave her; for she felt her colour rising with his clear blue eyes upon her. She was attracted by something boyish and appealing about him; he reminded her in a way of Brenton when he was younger. Though this lad was more slender he had the same assurance, the same certainty of his own attractiveness.

"My mum knitted it for me," he said, "and I wouldn't like it to get wrecked for want of a few stitches."

"It should have had a few stitches as soon as it was torn. Now it will need darning."

"No needle; oh, a packet of darners I want too, with big eyes. I'm not much of a hand at sewing."

"Leave your pullover here and I'll mend it for you," she said impulsively.

"Gosh, would you? That's awfully kind of you." His blue eyes, clear and shining with health and youth, looked at her gratefully; and though Adam's eyes had been brown it was Adam he suddenly reminded her of. Ah, youth . . . She suppressed a sigh as she took the garment from him, while the men standing nearby chaffed him and complained that they had plenty of things that needed mending, too.

"Come back after lunch and it'll be ready," she said, ignoring them.

Brenton, busy taking and counting money, took no notice. The engineer in charge, who had come to get a new razor, found that

he was interested in all water-conservation schemes, and offered to take him over the site of the projected works that afternoon.

Delie sat on the top deck, outside her cabin door, darning with the blue wool. The pullover was felted under the arms a little, and from it came a scent of male sweat that was not unpleasant.

Alex and Meg were asleep, Gordon and Brenton were resting in their bunks with picture-books. This was the most peaceful time of the day for her. There was a pile of ironing waiting to be done, and plenty of her own mending; but she took time and care over making a neat darn that would have surprised her Aunt Hester.

"How's it going?"

She looked over the rail at the fair-haired young man who hailed her. He was wearing a clean, faded blue shirt and had obviously slicked down his curls with water.

"Not finished yet. Come up," she said.

He came on board and drew up a deck-chair beside her, leaning over to look at what she had done.

"Marvellous!" he said, feeling the darn with a long finger. "You know, it's really——"

"—Awfully kind of me!" she chimed in. They both laughed.

"Shh, the children are still asleep."

They talked in low voices so as not to disturb them. This gave them a feeling of intimacy as they sat together in the sun. She felt instantly at ease with this young man, as if they had been friends for years.

When she had finished she patted the darn and smoothed it with the point of the needle. "There! It should really be pressed, but at least it won't run any more."

"It's perfect." He took the jumper from her and pulled it vigorously over his head.

"But you've got it on back to front!"

"Yes. That way the mend is over my heart," he said with an unmistakable look.

She blushed and got up quickly. "It's time for the children to wake up," she said.

She peeped into the cabin where Meg was still sound asleep in her crib. Next door Alex slept peacefully. From the saloon came Gordon's voice: "Can't we get up now, Mummy?"

"All right, dear. Can you put on your shoes by yourself?"

"I'll be going then, Ma'am. And thank you again."

"That's quite all right," she said coolly and formally to the young man. "I'm sure your mother would have done it better."

The pullover had ruffled his light curls as he dragged it over his head, and he looked so charming and so young that she was alarmed at her own feelings.

Gordon came clattering on deck with his shoes undone.

"Hullo!" he said in a friendly voice. Delie went to help Brenny with his shoes. When they came out, Gordon and the young man were deep in a discussion of fishing methods. He was telling Gordon that he would show him the proper way to rig a set-line, so that a cod could never get away, if he'd come down to where his lines were set.

"Can we, Mummy?" begged Gordon.

"Well . . . Baby will wake in a few minutes. How far is it?"

"Just a step along the bank, Ma'am."

"Well, wait a minute, will you?" She looked again at the sleeping pair, and then put on a hat—a thing she rarely wore, but she felt that it gave her dignity, a married woman's status.

The four of them walked round the shore of the lake. She was afraid to let the boys out of sight in case they wandered away and got lost in the desolate surroundings.

When they came back she felt gay, young and light-hearted as she had not felt for years. She would never see this young man again, and the thought did not worry her, yet he had made her afternoon happy. In him she saw, made new and young again, the two loves of her life—Adam and Brenton. Because of this she felt a rare, renewed tenderness for her husband.

She had been going to tell Brenton about the walk that night; but at tea-time Gordon let fall that they had been out with one of the men from the camp, and he had been on board 'talking to Mummy'.

Delie explained how she had offered to mend the pullover; it

sounded odd and unconvincing now. She could not explain the impulse, how he had reminded her of her young cousin. Brenton's brows drew down and the vein swelled in his neck. The children became silent and apprehensive. As soon as they were alone in their cabin that night, he turned on her.

"Didn't I tell you not to get off the boat without me?"

"Yes, but the boys did want to go, and he seemed such a nice young man——"

"A nice young man! And how long was he on board this afternoon? I suppose you thought you'd like a change, you little bitch."

She stared at him, too surprised to reply. Had he really said that? The veins were standing out in his temple as well as his neck, and his face was red. She noticed with a corner of her mind the contrast of colour that it made with the sea-blue of his eyes.

"So you thought you'd like a 'nice young man' as a change from your poor old husband with the gammy leg?" He limped irritably about the cabin, helping the lame leg with an impatient hand behind it.

"Brenton, for God's sake be reasonable. Nothing happened, we talked a little while as I was finishing the darn, and then walked along the bank with the children."

"I suppose it's the one I saw as I was coming back . . . A fair-haired, skinny chap, I could break him in half with one hand. So I'm not enough for you?"

He gripped her wrist in steel-hard fingers.

"How much whisky have you had since dinner?" she asked contemptuously.

"Never mind. It takes more than a few whiskies to make Teddy Edwards drunk." He bent her arm until she was forced to her knees on the floor. "What else happened? Tell me!"

"Let me go! Let me go!" She was in a rage now, she beat at him with her free arm, trying to bite the hard brown hand that held her. He jerked it away from her teeth, and slammed her own hand back into her face, then dropped her in a heap on the floor. She tasted blood where a tooth had cut the inside of her mouth. Her lip already felt swollen.

She realised that it was the other man's youth that had infuriated him. He hated the thought that he was getting older. She got up slowly, rubbing her mouth. If only Ben were here! She thought of Ben, always so gentle, and loving her so much. It was as well she had not tried to tell Brenton about Ben.

"You're such a fool," she said coldly. "If I'd wanted 'a change', as you call it, I'd easily have found a substitute for you before now. Don't you think I had plenty of admirers in Melbourne? You never bothered to accompany me, but I was always loyal to you. And now you make a jealous scene about a lad I have seen once, just because he makes you feel old."

That went home; she rejoiced bitterly at his hurt look.

Brenton turned away with a strangled noise, then rounded menacingly upon her. "Get out of my sight! Go away!"

She went with her head high, and began to pace up and down the unlighted deck on the far side from the cabin doors. For him to talk to her like that! After all she had silently put up with, the girl in the shanty, the woman with the gold hairpins, Nesta, and how many more?

Her mind whirled on the edge of black depths. For the first time she understood the meaning of the phrase, 'his senses reeled'. All was over then between them; this was the end.

She went to the stern and climbed down into the dinghy, undoing the stiff rope with clumsy fingers. For hours, after passing under the low bridge, she rowed about aimlessly on the broad expanse of Lake Victoria, while the stars moved slowly westward, and danced in points of white fire on the black waters of the lake.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

There were still plenty of craft on the lower river—trading steamers, fishermen's boats, houseboats, the dinghies of 'Murray whalers', and strange one-person boats worked by a treadle like a sewing-machine. Usually there was someone to yarn with, and Brenton staved away night after night.

Delie had made a resolute not to share his bunk again; she had not forgiven him, and she didn't want any more children.

"Of course if I can't get what I want here I can always go elsewhere," he said coldly one night when she repulsed him. He got dressed and went out again, and did not come back until the next morning.

He left her alone after that, but though she told herself that this was what she wanted, she was oddly discontented and unhappy. She did some drawing at night after the children were in bed, to keep her hand in; but mostly she went to her bunk soon after them.

It was a month later when Brenton came in one night earlier than usual, just after she had blown out the lamp. She lay very still in the warm, kerosene-scented darkness. A mosquito was shrilling up near the panelled ceiling. She could hear Brenton's breathing, heavy and quick, as he undressed close beside her in the small cabin, and see his broad figure against the starlit doorway. In a moment he would climb into the top bunk.

Then suddenly, treacherously, her body began to long for him. She became intensely aware of his every movement, his every breath, and to long for him to come nearer.

'I don't want him,' she thought fiercely, 'I hate him.' But when in a moment he began groping his way into her bunk, a great wave of gladness swept over her.

"No . . . I'm tired," she muttered feebly.

He laughed confidently. "You want me; I can tell."

'After all, he's my husband,' she thought in the last moment before her conscious, reasoning self was overwhelmed. But she could not escape from the feeling, afterwards, that she had been betrayed by her senses.

It was not the first time her body had taken control and ordered her life against her will. It had betrayed her before when she had wanted with all her mind to give herself to Adam; it had let her down when she wanted to go on with her art studies rather than get married; and in its weakness it had led to the years of childbearing which were sapping her creative energy and using up the best years of her life in a round of domestic drudgery.

The saints were right to mortify the flesh, to scourge and starve their despised bodies into submission. The flesh was not weak; it was strong, with the power of the whole life-force behind it, demanding to be reproduced for ever, and always at war with the life of contemplation.

She should, she thought in despair, have belonged to some stern sect whose discipline was imposed from without: fasting, continence, solitude and silence were what she craved, having too little of any of them. Alone, her spirit would always be vanquished.

Alex was an enquiring child, with bright, alert eyes under their fine black brows. He was fascinated with everything that lived and moved, from a green caterpillar that he found in a cabbage to a beautiful moth, its gold-dust wings marked with crimson dots, that he brought to his mother in his hot little hand with "all its powder tummin' off".

She found him some chrysalids of the Orange Wanderer butterfly to keep in a cardboard box with a few twigs of cotton-bush. He handled the beautiful pale-green cases so much that only one pupa survived.

Delie found him watching with big eyes and set face the terrible struggles of the insect to emerge—the splitting of the now transparent case, the protrusion of one crumpled wing.

"Doesn't it hurt it?" he kept asking.

"Getting born is a very exhausting business sometimes; but it is worth the struggle to get out into the sun."

"But is it, after all?" she thought, watching the frantic movements of the butterfly, and wondering again at the ruthless, impersonal force of life. At last the new, complete individual emerged, and rested, trembling, with spread wings that were still crinkled like a leaf just out of the bud. She looked with pity at this fellow-creature that would fall into the river, or become the meal of a bird or lizard, or simply die of cold next winter.

Alex caught a little gecko lizard on a sandy spit where they had been tied up overnight. Even when he had put out his hand it remained frozen, regarding him with small, bright eyes. He

picked it up by the tail—and next moment the lizard was gone, while in his hand remained a horrible, squirming stump, like a very lively worm. Alex dropped it with a yell. It rolled about on the sand like a caterpillar attacked by ants.

He went roaring to his mother. "His tail tummed off! His tail tummed off!" he cried between sobs.

She explained that it hadn't hurt the lizard, its tail was meant to come off to distract its enemies when it was in danger; but Alex was not convinced, and didn't believe the lizard could grow a new tail. Would his own big toe grow again if it dropped off? Well, then . . .

He was fascinated with the little Welcome swallows which nested year after year beneath the overhang of the after-deck. They never went away for the winter, as Mummy said some of them did, flying all the way to Japan across the sea. They stayed with the boat winter and summer, and travelled with it up and down the river.

He liked to see them flashing round and round the boat as they steamed along, darting past the steering pole in front, round and back to their nests again. Their backs were like dark blue satin. They didn't mind people; he was sure they wouldn't object if he put his hand into one of the little mud nests and felt the young ones. But Mummy would never let him climb over the rail, and he couldn't row the dinghy and was not even allowed to climb down into it, because he hadn't learned to swim properly yet.

One day when Daddy and Gordon were ashore, carrying a pile of newly-bought goods up to a farmhouse, he and Brenny stood by the wire-netting of the after-deck. Two swallows came back to the nests, each with a small insect in his bill. An excited cheeping came from the young ones out of sight.

"I'm goin' to c'imb over and look," said Alex.

"You'll get into a row," said Brenny indifferently. He was sulking because he had not been asked to help his father.

Alex climbed up and got one chubby leg over the rail. There was a ledge outside, only a few inches wide. He clung there by one hand while he felt under the deck with the other. But his arm was too short; he couldn't reach.

Just below, the greenish water glided past, reflecting the sun dazingly from its silken surface. He could see tiny insects and even bits of dust floating on the water's skin. He dropped a lump of spit and saw the ripples widen outwards, their reflections dancing in golden waves across the stern-post.

He hooked a toe in the netting and hung dangerously far out over the edge. His fine dark curls hung down, the blood suffused his face. His fingers just reached the edge of one nest. He felt something warm and fluffy, and moved excitedly. His foot slipped. With a short cry and a splash he fell head-first into the river.

Delie was in the galley, stirring a mixture of mashed potato and egg-yolk for the baby; the Chief Poisoner was clattering dishes on the work-bench; when young Brenny rushed in and announced importantly, "Alex is in the river!"

She dropped the saucepan on the floor and rushed out, while the Poisoner, who never listened to 'them kids', stared vacantly after her and then down at the mess on the floor, twisting one side of his long yellowed moustache in amazement.

Alex had fallen in on the side away from the bank. Delie saw that at any moment he might sink again in deep water. He was face down on the surface, his arms and legs moving feebly.

She tore off her shoes and jumped in beside him. The moment she came up she grabbed him and turned him over; he was semi-conscious, and she was able to tow him while swimming on one side. When she felt the soft, oozing mud of the river-bank beneath her feet she gasped with relief.

Before she was well out of the water she had held Alex upside-down; water streamed out of his mouth and nostrils, and he began to cough and cry. Once, long ago, she had been rescued like this from the sea. . .

Trembling and shivering in her wet clothes, she held and soothed him. Brenton came charging down the bank, Gordon at his heels.

"What happened? Did you fall overboard?"

"Alex did," she quavered. "If Brenny hadn't come and told me, he'd have been gone."

"How did you fall in, son? Did you climb over the railing?"

"Y-yes, Daddy. Alec wantedter see ve swallows in veir nests."

"Oh Alex, you naughty boy! You might have been——"

"Quiet a moment, Delie. Now, Alex, I want you to do it again."

"What on earth——!"

"'Quiet,' I said." He took the shaking child from her arms and went on board, then set him down outside the netting, where he clung in terror. Taking off his own shirt and shoes, Brenton dived overboard.

"Now jump," he said.

"I won't, I won't! Alec f'ightened of the big water."

"Jump when I tell you! You're quite safe when I'm here. Daddy will catch you."

Whether he lost his grip and fell, or let go on purpose, Alex dropped into the water with a thin cry. Brenton had him in his arms the moment he came up.

"Stop panicking; do as I tell you. Now turn on your back and float."

After supporting the child's head for a while, he quietly removed his hand. "Now, isn't that easy? Hey, don't cave in in the middle. Just lie back as if it was a bed. Now if you ever fall in again, just float till someone comes."

By now Delie was recovering from the shock, but she snatched Alex back as soon as his father brought him to shore.

To her remonstrances he only replied, "If I hadn't gone in straight away, he'd have been scared of the water for the rest of his life. And what's the good of a river man who can't swim?"

Delie, fearing a chill, packed him in his cot with two whisky bottles filled with hot water. He was just getting drowsy when Brenton came in with a baby swallow, grey and downy, cradled in his big hand.

"You can keep it warm in bed for a while, but don't hurt it. I have to put it back in the nest for the mother to feed."

Alex beamed with happiness.

"Huh!" muttered Brenny sourly. "If I'd climbed over the rail I'd of got whacked."

Delie gave the two older boys lessons on deck every morning. Gordon would try to smooth away the frown-lines that were now marked deeply between her level brows, and that showed up in the clear light.

"You look awful tired," he said, looking up from his lesson book and seeing with the uncompromising eyes of youth his mother's sagging lips and the wrinkles which time had made in the fine skin about her eyes.

She bent over to correct his spelling, and he stared at her head near his own. "Your hair's going grey!"

"It is not!" She started and recoiled as if she had been stung.

"It is so!" He reached up and tried to pull out one of several grey threads. His fingers could not sort it out from the brown mass, and he pulled several with a painful tweak. He held them up triumphantly before her nose.

She took the hairs irritably and sat, staring at them, silent and perturbed. Four of the hairs were glistening like fine brown silk; the fifth was dead and grey, and seemed coarser in texture, more like wire.

That night she went early to her cabin and, taking the lamp, looked long and critically at the changes that had come so gradually to her face that she had not noticed them. She sat down on the lower bunk, and took off her shoes and stockings.

Her legs were white, with a few fine, brown hairs. Still shapely, but thickening, with a cluster of bluish veins knotted and con-tused at the back of the calves, the result of being on her feet too much during her last pregnancy. And her feet, her beautiful slim feet! The splayed toes, the pinched little toenail flattened on one side from thirty years of shoes, the corns and callouses looked back at her. They were no longer the feet of a girl.

How short a time it seemed since she was thirteen, and had walked on these same bare feet for the first time into the cool, silken waters of the Murray! She closed her eyes and remembered that night, the far, fluting call of the swans going over, the stars like jewels on the river's calm breast.

Twenty years ago! Twenty years!

The river lapped past the bows, steadily, quietly flowing

towards the sea. 'Softly, flow softly!' she cried in her mind. But she had the sensation of being caught in a current that was relentlessly speeding up. There was no way of arresting that endless flow.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

In the narrow world of the river, world affairs seemed far away and unimportant. Politics were local: legislation that affected navigation or the wool industry, the long-standing jealousies between States over riparian rights, the findings of interstate commissions on the river—all these were discussed knowledgeably and heatedly.

Few bothered their heads about a British pledge to defend Belgium against aggression, or the growing might and arrogance of Germany. Yet in the next four years many a river-man was to die far away from the quiet Murray, in France and Flanders and Gallipoli, defending 'little Belgium' and fighting Germany.

More important to Delie than world affairs, more terrible than the threat of war, was the knowledge that she was once again pregnant. She blamed Brenton for carelessness, but she blamed herself more for yielding to him again in spite of her resolve. Such weakness degraded her, and now she was to be punished.

He was drinking more than ever, and was little help with the children, who were rather frightened of him. Delie contemplated the future with despair. Five children! She felt that she could not bear it, that she would rather die.

It was not the discomfort to be gone through again, the shapelessness, the heaviness of her body, the sickness and indigestion, the pangs of labour and birth; but she began to feel that she was on a treadmill, year after year doing nothing but rear babies and do without sleep or rest.

And meanwhile her youth was slipping away, her creative time when she should have been painting. The coloured cliffs and long, calm reaches of the lower river, the great leaning red-

gums as graceful as willows but so much more interesting in form, the lagoons with their reeds and birds, all filled her with an urge to draw and paint that was like a physical craving.

She did some crayon and charcoal sketches, made notes in her sketch-book that she could use—'some day'—for the basis of a large picture. The longing for colour, for slapping the paint in free masses on a big canvas, had to be fought down while she washed and folded napkins, prepared baby food, sat by Alex's bed through a fresh attack of bronchitis, corrected Gordon's and Brenny's copy-books and bathed little Meg. Now she missed Ben's help when the boys fought and squabbled until she felt like screaming!

Brenton seemed indifferent when she told him, and could not see why she was upset. More sons meant free labour. The older boys were already becoming useful as deck-hands. He was making good money out of his trading ventures, particularly the running of whisky to Lake Victoria, where he had a monopoly, and to the officially 'dry' town of Mildura, where he could get fantastic prices for hard liquor.

He decided to buy a barge again to carry extra stores, and to employ two more hands. He seemed to have forgotten his mania for speed, and a new obsession had taken hold of him: to make money.

One night she came upon him emptying a little out of each whisky bottle into a tenth one which was empty. The other nine were being topped up with water.

Delie appreciated the extra money for baby-clothes and blankets, but she felt guilty about the way they were getting it. Already she had protested about the selling of whisky at Lake Victoria; one man had been killed in a drunken brawl in the engineering camp, and another had rolled into the fire in his sodden sleep and been burnt to death.

"You can't do that, Brenton!" she said now. "It isn't honest. They pay high enough prices for the whisky——"

"What's the matter with you? Do you think they care, as long as it tastes like whisky? First you complain that I cause their drunken fights, now you complain because I'm making the whisky

a bit weaker. Don't you think it's better for them to take a bit of water with it, even if they don't know?"

"I suppose it is," she said unhappily. "But I wish we had nothing to do with it."

She had never been off the boat since Brenton's display of jealous rage, and had not seen the young man with the blue sweater, as since her pregnancy she had not helped in the store. She hoped he was not drinking too much; his eyes had been so clear and healthy.

She felt no need for the company of other women, but there was a great loneliness in her spirit. She had been too busy to keep up letters, and Imogen had gradually ceased to write. It was years since she had been to Melbourne. She wanted to 'talk shop' with other artists, to engage in stimulating arguments. The two art journals she took only seemed to accentuate her isolation.

In Morgan one day when the *Philadelphia* was loading stores on to her barge, she noticed a spare, bearded figure on the wharf—a man with aquiline features and observant dark eyes, who carried a sketch-block under his arm and a painting-satchel in his hand.

She looked at his thin, rather red lips below the fine dark moustache and bony, arrogant nose, the pale face shaded by a Panama hat, the smart but casual clothes. He stood out among the wharf-labourers and river-hands and railwaymen like an orchid among potatoes.

She walked down to the wharf and past the stranger, looking deeply into his dark eyes. Here was a fellow-artist, and she longed to speak. He returned the look for what seemed a long, breathless moment; then his eyes passed over her figure and were quickly averted. There was a spark of humour in them, a quirk of an unsmiling eyebrow that encouraged her. He reminded her in some indefinable way of her dead father.

He turned to walk up the white, stony slope to the main street. She followed, hovering outside a shop when she saw him go in, but she could not pluck up courage to speak.

Before he could come out again and perhaps notice that she was following him, she hurried back on board.

The next day she saw him loading his satchel and some provisions into a dinghy drawn up to the bank and laden with camping gear. He went off towards the yellow cliffs above the upstream bend, rowing deliberately and effortlessly. Not very young, she judged—between forty and fifty. She felt absurdly desolate as she watched him go, as if she had lost a friend.

Before they left Morgan again the water began to fall. The river was flowing clear and slow, all the silt fallen to the bottom.

"Fishing pretty good, Dan?" asked Brenton in a genial roar from the wheel-house, as the *Philadelphia* pulled in by Old Dan's camp, where drum-nets spread on the bank, and the twin stakes of a cross-line set in the river, showed the headquarters of a full-time fisherman.

"Aye," growled Dan, known along the river as 'Dismal'. "Callop and bream are bitin' well within this clear water. But the damn' river's getting so slow that the cod'll stop movin' soon. I don't like it."

He was 'in the money', and had hailed the steamer to get in a stock of things for his camp—a new quart-pot, a couple of grey blankets, and some extra hooks and lines.

"'Ad that there quartpot for nigh fifteen year," said Dismal, kicking an ancient black billy lying by his neatly-swept fireplace of stones. "Now it 'as ter go on me. Leaking like a sieve."

"D'you reckon we're in for a drought?" asked Brenton. "Looks uncommonly like the beginning of '02 to me—the weather, I mean. I don't know about the river, I was up the top end then."

"There'll be a bad drought next year," said Dismal Dan impressively, taking his black pipe from among his yellowed whiskers and waving it in the air. "Yer can take it from me, mate. And it'll be wuss than the larst one, when I walked acrost the river at Morgan in me boots."

Brenton scowled and tapped his teeth. He had faith in the weather prophecies of old-timers. And here he was with a barge in tow for the first time in years, and more goods to dispose of than he'd ever carried before!

As the dry winter was succeeded by a dry summer, the gloomy predictions of Dismal Dan were confirmed. Little or no rain had fallen in Victoria and New South Wales, and it was so warm that hardly any snow gathered on the Alps. The river continued to fall steadily.

Millions of gallons of life-giving water, urgently needed by farmers and fruit-growers for the irrigation works they had built up, flowed wastefully out to sea. By the summer of early 1914 things were desperate. At Renmark, the Irrigation Trust had built a dam in the river-bed with sandbags to hold back sufficient water to keep the pumps working until after the fruit was harvested. All along the lower river, steamers lay trapped in shallow and dwindling water-holes, or went aground and lay canted in the mud.

"One lock! Even one lock would have stopped it from all flowing away," cried Brenton. "I told you they'd do nothing until there was another drought! And how many millions are they wasting in running their railways at a loss to compete with the steamers? Blind, stupid fools."

He regarded the drought at a piece of personal spite on the part of Fate, or Nature, or some such abstraction; coming as it did just when he was expanding his trade, and had sunk most of his capital in the new barge and extra cargo. Delie listened to his ranting and watched his blood-suffused face, in fear that he would have a stroke when they actually ran aground.

Brenton was not in the wheel-house when it happened. They were between Wakerie and Kingston and he had just handed over to the new mate and stepped to the side to watch how the water was sucking in from the bank as they passed—a sure sign of very low water.

"Alf!" he called to the Poisoner. "Start taking soundings in the bows there. We haven't got more than six inches to spare, I'd say."

He had put the engine back to slow. When they hit the sand-bank in mid-stream that had always been covered by many feet of water, they stopped softly, reluctantly, almost without a jolt.

The new mate had never been known to swear. He had a sanctimonious expression, and had brought three different copies of the Bible on board among his things. When the skipper rushed back to the wheel-house he found the mate on his knees, praying.

Brenton pushed him aside with an oath, put the engine astern and tried to get her off, but he only churned up some sand.

"God blast the bloody boat!" he cried, stamping round in the wheelhouse. "God blast this flaming river, and the bloody blasted Government that does nothing about it. And as for you!" he roared, rounding on the cowering mate. "Get out my sight! Praying!"

He had a wire rope taken round a solid red-gum tree on the bank ahead of the boat, and wound the other end on a cleat on the paddle-shaft. The *Philadelphia* slid forward a few feet, and then stuck fast again. A line was taken out astern and the paddles reversed, watched interestedly by the children; but it was no use. They were fast aground, while the barge still floated free behind them.

Before long the *Philadelphia* was isolated in a stagnant pool, as she had been years ago in the Darling; but this was worse, for she was aground on one side and as the waters fell the deck began to slant. Things slid and rolled off the table, the milk sat at an angle in the saucepan, the pans almost slid off the stove. It was like being at sea, like the steady lean of a sailing-ship driving with her lee-rail under water.

The children thought it great fun to run down the slope of the deck and bang into the railing; or to walk along with one foot higher than the other, chanting, "I was born on the side of a hill, I was born on the side of a hill."

"Just like 'oe!'" groaned Brenton, as he put the crew to stretching tarpaulins from the barge over the western side to protect the paintwork from the afternoon sun. He had plenty of tins of paint on board, so the crew need not be idle but could give the upper structure two new coats of paint. He settled down to wait, helpless and frustrated, for the fresh that did not come.

To Delie it did not seem as bad as the 1902 drought, because she had not before her eyes the miseries of the dying sheep along

the Darling banks, or the dreariness of the mallee farm near which they had stuck the second time. The tall gums that studded the banks retained their even olive-green foliage, the delicate colouring of their mauve and coral twigs, the amber and grey and salmon-pink of huge, smooth trunks.

On one side was what had been an island; now it was a low wooded patch among a sea of mud, where lignums grew in twisted profusion, and native willows and coolabahs drooped their blue-grey leaves. Brenton laid boards from the base of the gangplank across this mud, so that they could walk on to the island.

Across the lagoon in which they were aground was a high yellow cliff rising out of the water, very rich in its colouring against the deep-blue of the sky. An irrigation-pipe ran down this, and there was a steam-pump at its base. Out of sight on top of the cliffs there must be a farmhouse.

When the river-bed had dried out sufficiently, Delie got out and walked on the bottom. It had become a mass of solid hexagonal cakes of baked mud, with fissures running down between them so deeply that they seemed to have been formed by some convulsion of the earth's surface. Where the bottom was sandy it had not cracked, but was ringed in successive layers where the water had slowly receded.

She stood in the deepest part yet uncovered, beside a little winding channel, narrow enough for her to jump over, which represented the whole of the Murray's flow. She looked round at the boat, saw that nobody was watching, and, holding her skirts high, she ran and took a flying leap across. She imagined herself telling a ring of open-mouthed grandchildren of "the day I jumped across the Murray river."

Looking up at the ringed banks, she saw that at the highest levels green herbage had begun to grow; but where she stood was a dead world. A few empty mussel-shells lay in the cracks, the bleached claw of a yabbie, a shrimp's thorax, a dried-up fish.

Where she stood now, the water would have been about thirty feet over her head. She thought of that huge volume of water,

the amount that would be needed just to fill this reach, without flowing steadily through it at two or three miles an hour. It seemed as if the river had died, and would never flow again.

Yet she had seen it like this before; and if only the engineers' plans could be carried out instead of being left to moulder in pigeon-holes in Government Departments of Works, it need never be like this again.

Already the engineers had shown what they could do, with the construction of the huge Burrenjack Dam on the Murrumbidgee. It was even now saving the lives of stock on irrigated Riverina holdings. Another big dam on the Murray, and a series of weirs and locks to prevent the water flowing away to the sea, were all that was needed to ensure that the river would never run dry again. Only the inability of the different state governments to agree prevented these works from being carried out.

There was even talk of building a great wall or barrage across the mouth, to be closed in time of drought so as to prevent the flowing away of fresh water and the inward flow of salt; for the whole of the lower reaches had now become saline, and a salt-water mullet had been caught at Mannum, more than a hundred miles upstream.

She looked round at the mud-caked slopes and wondered if she would ever see the mouth, the long white beach with the foaming breakers that she had heard about as a child; or if her life would end in some stagnant pool like this, fallen and dwindled from its high purpose, and ringed with the abandoned levels of old achievements.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

The farmhouse on top of the cliffs was a very different place from the mallee selection where Mrs. Slope had led her terrible and hopeless existence. The land was irrigated from the river, and the house, cool and comfortable, built of the local limestone, was surrounded by fruit trees.

The farmer's wife, when she learned of Delie's condition, offered to take the children while she went to hospital. Mrs. Melville's own children were all grown up and had left home, except for one son who helped his father with the orangery, the lucerne paddocks and the cows. They were active, energetic, progressive men, and Mrs. Melville had all possible conveniences in her kitchen.

The house lay well back from the cliffs, down which the only track was at some distance from where the steamer was aground. Here there was a break in the high wall of yellow rock which made a natural stair-way. Above the break, for the last fifty feet, steps had been cut in the cliff-face.

Jim Melville when he wanted to descend preferred to use the pipe, which was quicker if more dangerous; letting himself over the edge of the cliff, he would slide down in a few moments to his pump at water-level. From here a narrow track cut in the base of the cliffs led round to the steps, where he kept a dinghy moored.

Mrs. Melville was delighted to have the company of another woman. She had visited the boat, though she was rather scared of the steps, and Delie and the two older children had gone back with her to the farmhouse. But it was the baby Meg who won her heart, with her cheerful friendliness and vivid colouring.

She might have been of the same colouring herself once—her eyes and her brows were still dark, though her hair was iron-grey, and her cheeks had a healthy freshness.

"I'd just love to have four children again," she told the incredulous Delie.

"But they're so much *work*!" she cried. She had been tremendously busy lately, sewing a pile of new nightgowns for herself and the baby from material in the boat's stock, and catching up on the mending she had been putting off for months.

"That's because you're trying to bring them up in such difficult conditions. How tired you must get of living in such a poky space, and sleeping in a bunk. It must be most uncomfortable."

"But it's not!" said Delie, watching Mrs. Melville fill a kettle at her modern sink and take it across to the stove. "I love it, and

I wouldn't like to live in a house, now. There's just one thing I miss."

"What's that?"

"A tap with running water."

"You mean to say you haven't got a tap? You have to dip all your water out of the river with a bucket?"

"Not all. When the engine's running it's pumped automatically to a high tank, and feeds to the bathroom from there. But Brenton says a tap in the galley would be turned on all the time and waste too much water."

"Well! And you manage to cook in a galley?"

"Oh yes, I learnt to cook in a galley; I taught myself from recipe books, and took lessons from our various men cooks. I was determined to become a *good* cook, and I think I am, but I'm clumsy and get things in a mess of broken eggs and spilled flour."

"Because you haven't enough room!" said Mrs. Melville triumphantly. She looked complacently round her large, tidy kitchen. "You need more room to work in."

"No, I don't," said Delie obstinately. "Big rooms mean more floor-space to keep clean. It's all so compact on the boat. Think of the time most women have to spend on washing and polishing floors, and windows, and verandas and front steps. Housework is always a waste of time; merely a process of making things clean so that they can get dirty again."

"Well, I don't know," said Mrs. Melville with a little laugh, but looking rather shocked. "I've never looked at it that way. And I must say I wouldn't like moving about all the time." She poured boiling water on the tea, decisively.

"We're not moving at present, and it's terrible."

"All the same, I think you should persuade your husband—I mean when you have five children—to take some job on dry land, or at least to establish you in a little home along the river somewhere while he travels."

"I wouldn't think of asking him," said Delie.

She couldn't help feeling that Mrs. Melville had forgotten what four children, the eldest eight, could be like, that she didn't

realise what she was letting herself in for in offering to take them for a fortnight. But it was a great relief not to have to leave them with Brenton in his present mood, especially with cases of whisky still on board.

There was a road along the top of the cliffs, but it would be a difficult job to unload the crates by dinghy and have them hoisted up the cliffs for delivery by wagon. On the other side of the river was a waste of dried swamps, lignum, reed-beds, and dwindling billabongs.

The *Philadelphia* was aground on a sand-spit running out from the island, on the far side from the cliffs. There were plenty of rabbits, and even a few hares on the island, and the river was alive with fish, so there was no lack of fresh meat.

Brenton paid off the engineer and Prentice the Poisoner, and stayed on when Delie and the children left, morose and lonely. Winter had begun, but still there had been no rain anywhere to speak of. He felt that he was doomed to be stuck in this hole in the mud for ever; yet he would not leave the boat unguarded.

Mr. Melville drove Delie into the nursing-home at Waikerie in his motor-truck, a bumpy and uncomfortable ride, slithering through drifts of sand and crossing dry creek-beds full of stones.

Delie came round after the final anæsthetic with a feeling of triumph. It was not that she had produced another child—that was nothing new now—but that for the first time she felt that she knew how to bear a child. The knowledge which the wise aboriginal women passed on to the young girls of the tribe before they brought forth their first baby upon a clean, antiseptic bed of gum-leaves, she had acquired slowly and painfully, alone.

With each of her six confinements she had come nearer to that ancient knowledge, which meant, quite simply, not to fight against the pain but to go with it—to welcome each twisting, tearing spasm as a step onward, and let herself be carried along like a boulder on the bed of a flooded river.

Instead of bracing herself against the pain she yielded to it, and at once it became less. "That's right, little one! Push! Struggle! You're getting nearer to the light," she whispered, un-

consciously echoing the songs that the ancient lubras used to hasten the coming child: "Come! Here is your auntie waiting to see you. Come! See what a beautiful day it is. . . ."

The baby was lifted up for a moment for her to see its wet black hair and screwed-up eyes, 'Like a little Chinese doll,' she thought drowsily. The next day she waited and waited for the baby to be brought in—it was a girl, they had told her—but the light began to fade, it was evening and still she had not seen her child.

Suddenly all her old misgivings came back to her. There was something wrong. She had seen only its face last night, at midnight when the birth took place.

"Where's my baby?" she demanded of the sister-in-charge when she came in on her evening round of beds. "Why won't you let me see her?"

"You'll see her tomorrow," said the sister soothingly. "You've no milk yet, anyway. We're letting her have a rest today, after the tiring business of getting born."

"Why?" said Delie suspiciously. "It was a normal birth, wasn't it? An easy birth, in fact."

"Yes, it was. I must say, my dear, you're an ideal patient," said the sister warmly. "If they all had their babies with as little fuss as you do . . ."

"I've had plenty of practice."

She relaxed and stopped worrying. She felt at home in this place, it seemed no time since she'd been here with Meg. And now another baby! She would soon be seeing more than enough of it; meanwhile let her sleep undisturbed while she had the chance. . . .

When the baby was brought in the next morning it was awake, looking at her dully from two small, queerly-shaped eyes. She gazed at it with a painful curiosity, her heart beating heavily. It seemed apathetic and uninterested in the breast, though with the nurse's help she finally got it to suck.

As soon as the nurse had gone she examined the features in detail. The nose was a mere blob, the mouth shapeless, the ears

unnaturally small and set low down on the head; and the head itself was the wrong shape, wider than it was long.

With shaking fingers she unwrapped shawl and blanket, and laid the child on the pillow. Its limbs seemed normal, if rather short. But the head, and the eyes which disappeared at the corners into puffy folds of flesh, reminded her of that queer, repulsive little boy at the mallee farm, with his small, cunning eyes and animal voice. She heard Mrs. Slope's voice: "The doctor said it could happen to anyone . . ." But she said nothing to the nurse when she came back and put the baby in a crib beside her. When the doctor came in to see her, with his shrewd, cheerful gaze and jolly rubicund face, she felt better just at the sight of the little man. He had remembered her from the time of Meg's illness, and they were friends.

"The baby—is she all right, doctor?" she asked urgently, struggling to sit up again under the white quilt as soon as he had examined her. She felt tears of weakness and anxiety start from under her lids.

"Of course she's all right," he said heartily, but his face was turned away as he picked up the swathed bundle from the crib. "They all look a bit queer the first day or two, you know that."

"Yes, I know . . . But the shape of her head?"

"H'mm . . . A bit distorted with the stresses of birth, perhaps. Often happens. It will adjust itself in a few days."

"But it was an easy birth, and she's quite small, only seven pounds."

"Don't you worry your head, my dear. Worry's no good for nursing mothers. And as for you, young lady, you don't want your tummy upset by milk from a worried mother," he said, carrying the baby over to the window.

He kept his back to the bed as he examined the child in the full light, feeling the fontanelles at the top of the skull, but Delie watched him intently. He took one tiny fist and uncurled the fingers, examining the palm closely; unwrapped the feet and spread the toes with his fingers. The baby yawned, and he peered at the roof of its mouth.

As he turned to put the baby in the crib again, his back was to the light, but she thought she saw a look of suffering on his face, before it was covered by a mask of cheerfulness.

"Well, you know the formula," he said. "Fill 'em up and let 'em sleep. The milk's coming all right, eh? I don't think you'll have any feeding difficulties with this one, and you're in excellent condition. Ten days' rest here, and then you can take her home."

Her lips moved soundlessly. She wanted to say, "Is she sub-normal mentally? Will she grow up an idiot?" but the words would not come. She dared not ask.

He gave her a friendly wave from the door and went out.

She lay down and drew the sheet over her head, and gave way to a feeling of helpless horror. She knew, as clearly as if he had told her. She flung off the sheet, leant over the side of the bed and with an effort lifted the child and once more unrolled the shawl. She looked at the feet, and noticed that the big toe seemed to stand away from the others, but otherwise the feet were normally formed. Then the hands; they were certainly not artistic hands, but broader than they were long, with short, stumpy fingers and an in-curved thumb. But it was the head that frightened her, the short skull, the malformed ears. In a baby it was not so bad, but this would grow into a girl, a woman. . . .

She put the baby to her breast, but as it sucked she turned her face away to the wall.

The matron steadfastly refused to admit that there was anything wrong, though she could not fail to see that the mother was not happy with her child; where other mothers had to be restrained from disturbing their infants' sleep with too many displays of affection, this one hardly ever took hers into the bed except at regular feeding times, but lay with her face turned away from it, staring at the wall or out the window.

On the doctor's next visit, the last before Delie was to go home (for he had been away for a week visiting an urgent case, in the back country north of the river, who could not be moved) the

matron came in with him, looking solemn, and began:

"I'm afraid we have something to tell you, Mrs. Edwards. Your baby will need special care——"

"I know, matron. Would you please let me talk to the doctor alone?"

The matron looked slightly offended, and then swept out majestically, holding her white-capped head regally erect. The doctor raised his eyebrows and gave Delie a helpless look.

"I think you know what I have to tell you, my dear."

"Yes." Her voice was toneless and flat. "My baby is a congenital idiot. She will never be an adult mentally. She will always be misshapen and ugly, and the older she gets the worse she will look. I would just like to know why. My first baby was born dead, a beautiful, perfect child. And now this—this is allowed to live. Why?"

He shrugged his shoulders and spread his hands, palms outward. "Who can tell? There seems no meaning in these things. If you want to know the clinical reasons, we are still not sure. It seems to happen without reason, yet it's thought that some pre-natal condition must be responsible—an endocrine disturbance in the mother, emotional stress, tuberculosis; but we don't know. One thing is known, that the older the mother, the more chance there is of its happening. What are you—thirty-four?"

"Nearly thirty-five. But I knew a case—I saw a case along the river, where the mother was only a girl."

"More likely a case of cretinism. That has a definite cause in the child's own glands, and doesn't appear usually till the sixth month. It may be possible to cure it. But this—it's a typical case: the simian line, the incurved thumb, the formation of the skull and the feet—I'm afraid nothing can be done for the Mongolian child."

"Nothing can be done." But she thought, 'Oh yes, something can be done. Something must be done.'

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

The light-ripples danced on the cabin-roof as Delie lay looking up at it. Running in endless ripples of refracted sunlight . . . dancing, as a child dances, a little girl full of the joy of life. . . .

She groaned and turned her face into the pillow. Beside her the baby lay in the crib, quietly, but moving her hands aimlessly, perhaps seeing the bright patterns crossing the ceiling. Delie clutched the pillow-case in an agonised grip.

How hatefully, meaninglessly cruel could life be? Her first child, the child of her love and joy, had not even breathed. And now, out of hate and shame, was born this healthy, breathing, growing . . . monstrosity. For the rest of her life she would have it before her eyes. She knew now how Mrs. Slope must feel. Her daughter, too, had been 'a bit soft', and her grandson had been like—this.

She lifted her head and looked at the crib, and her face became set like a mask. She got up and went out to the deck where Brenton was putting in set-lines.

"Brenton, could you go up to the farm in the morning and ask Mrs. Melville if she'd keep the children a few more days? I know we were supposed to get them tomorrow, but she won't mind."

"All right, but why?"

"I don't feel—I don't feel quite strong enough. And the baby isn't as well as I'd like."

"She seems bright enough. Certainly not a beauty, though. She doesn't take after *me*."

"Will you go, though?"

"I said, all right."

He had taken a fair-sized callop that morning, and Delie baked it with potatoes and a savoury stuffing.

"You're getting to be quite a cook," he said grudgingly, taking another helping. "But you're not eating any. What's wrong?"

"I told you I don't feel too good. And then, I'm worried

about—— Oh, stop asking me questions!" she flared hysterically.

He stared, and put down his fork. "You're not quite yourself, are you? Well, go on to bed, if you like. I'll finish this up and wash the things."

"Would you? I'd . . . I'd rather go for a walk, it would help me to sleep."

"You'll tread on a tiger-snake."

"Then I'll take the dinghy and just row round the lagoon."

She climbed down unaided and got into the dinghy—the same dinghy into which Brenton had helped her on that fateful night so many years ago, in which he had kissed her while they drifted unheeding on the river.

A pang went through her for the inevitable change and decay of human relationships. She saw now that Adam's death had not been the tragedy it had seemed; in her memory he was always young and handsome and loving, she had not had to see him grow coarse-featured and indifferent.

She took the oars and rowed to the end of the stagnant lagoon in which they lay. It was not the same as when the river was flowing. She liked then to row upstream and ship her oars, letting the boat drift down again, slowly, slowly but inescapably borne by the current. It was then that she felt most a part of the river.

Now when she stopped rowing the dinghy stayed still, except to swing slightly in the faint breeze. She listened to the chorus of the frogs, the cry of a startled water-hen, the drip of water from the suspended oars. Time . . . her mind reverted to its obsession, yet she had a feeling that time was suspended as long as she sat there with the oars motionless above the still water.

Yet even now the baby was breathing, growing, becoming older . . . She knew with absolute certainty that this was wrong. She had only to be strong and unflinchingly do what was right, for the sake of the other children, for the sake of the child itself. No false sentiment, no cant about the sacredness of human life, must be allowed to obscure the issue.

With a decisive movement she dipped the oars, breaking the reflection of a star. Only a few bright stars were out, for the sky

was still full of cold blue light. As she came under the stern and picked up the rope to tie on, she froze in horror. In the dim light she could see a red stain on the rope. She dropped it with a faint cry. There were two more stains on the dinghy's bow. Blood . . . She looked at her spotless hands, and hurried on board with a painfully beating heart. Brenton was already asleep in the top bunk.

It was a brilliantly sunny morning, and she was walking on the river bank, on a long beach of yellow sand that sloped into the water. Someone had been digging in the sand not far from the water's edge, she noticed.

She walked towards the uneven heap. It seemed to take a long time to get there. With a curious unwillingness she looked into the hole in the sand. A child lay there, a small boy of about ten years, with smooth fair hair and closed eyes. Instantly she knew that she was looking at a grave.

But surely not this child's grave! He appeared to sleep, his skin was clear and healthy, his cheeks faintly pink, and his hair glistened in the sun. She took a step forward, feeling impelled to wake him. A little cascade of sand fell as she moved, and trickled on to the boy's bare arm.

She saw the eyelids flutter and struggle to rise. The eyes opened; and there was nothing beneath the lids but a white worm-eaten cavity.

With a scream she turned to run, but the sand gave under her feet and seemed to entrap them. She was still screaming when Brenton woke her, bending over the bunk. After that she dozed only fitfully, afraid to sleep again, until the first ray of the morning sun sent the light-ripples dancing across the ceiling.

She knew that the child of her dream was her first son, long buried in the sand of the river-bank up near Torumbarry. He would be ten—no, eleven this year. She got up and swung the bucket over the side, and dashed some cold water over her swollen eyes.

The rope on the bucket reminded her of something, and with superstitious fear she went to the stern and pulled up the dinghy.

There was a blob of bright red paint on the rope, and two more on the bows . . . Under one of the thwarts was the small tin of red that Brenton must have been using yesterday to brighten up a lure for cod. She almost laughed aloud at her fears. She felt once more strong and determined.

"I'm going now," said Brenton. Delie did not look at him, but busied herself with the dishes. The baby, fed and bathed with her usual care, was asleep in the crib. She remembered how Brenton hadn't wanted her to help with the dishes, that night when she first had tea with him on board . . . Strange, how her mind kept reverting to that time. But she knew that the events of that year had led inevitably to the present, to this particular day in her life which she would never forget.

"D'you want anything special from the farm?"

"No. Give the children my love. Mrs. Melville will load you with eggs and cream anyway."

"She'll ask about the baby."

"Tell her . . . tell her it's all right."

He climbed rather heavily down into the dinghy. It rocked and then steadied. He fitted the oars and balanced them a moment above the water, before making the first stroke. To Delie, watching impatiently, he seemed to be taking hours to get away.

Because she had been thinking so much of the past, the change in him seemed to strike her afresh. She looked at his thickened figure and heavy, red face, the grey curls that used to be gold as the sun, and down at her own work-stained hands with brown moth-patches appearing on the backs. 'Oh, what has time done to us?' she thought. 'Slowly, softly, imperceptibly making us old!'

She went and finished the dishes, putting everything away tidily, sweeping the galley, but all the time going out to see how far Brenton had gone. When she saw him reach the cliffs and fix the dinghy to a boulder, she went up and looked at the baby, still fast asleep. Then she came down again and walked round the bottom deck.

He was going up the break in the cliff now. She went up to the top deck and came down again. She couldn't stand still for an instant. Then she clenched her hands and climbed the steps again. When she looked into the cabin her heart began to hammer in her chest. Thank God! It had been taken out of her hands.

She saw at once that the sleeping child had rolled on to its face, and was lying inert in the crib. It could lift its head a little, but not for long; the neck-muscles were not strong enough. The pillow was soft and thick.

She turned and ran out of the cabin, down the steps over the paddle-box, and crossed the gangplank over the mud to the island. She had never walked far on the island, for she was afraid of tiger-snakes, but now she went on and on through the thin scrub of native willow and box-tree, scarcely looking where she was going. A lignum swamp blocked her way, but she pushed straight on, blindly, through the twining, scratching stems. There would be nothing to hear, she knew; but she wanted to be far out of ear-shot of any sound from the boat.

It was a long island, though not very wide. When she had reached the channel on the other side—nothing but an expanse of mud at present, with a small water-hole in the centre—she went on down its edge and followed round until she was on the boat side of the island, and could see the cliffs, though the steamer was still out of sight.

She thought she would sit and wait till she saw the dinghy leave the cliff landing, for her legs and arms were aching and scratched and bleeding; but she could not rest. After a few minutes she got up again and started round the island in the opposite direction. She was fighting a wild desire to go back to the boat and look at the baby.

At last she came round again to a point almost opposite the boat, and then she heard the creak of oars, the click of the rowlocks. She dropped flat behind a bush. Something rustled away from near her feet, a snake or a lizard, but she scarcely noticed. She strained her ears. Was that the child crying? She could never go through this again. . . .

TOWARDS THE FINAL SHORE

Then it came, his shout with a note of alarm in it.

"Delie! Delie! Where are you?"

She forced herself to move slowly, not to run. She must not show any anxiety.

"Delie! My God! She's gone overboard! Delie! Where are you?"

"Here I am. On the island. I was looking for——"

"Come quickly. Why did you leave her?"

"What?"

"The baby—I think she's dead. She must have rolled on to her face. She's not breathing . . ."

"Are you sure?"

He stared at her a moment, struck by the pale composure of her face contrasted with her lacerated limbs and wild hair, as she came across the gangplank.

"Why on *earth* did you go ashore? I came back—and there she was, with her face in the pillow."

She hurried now, running up the steps. Brenton had put the baby down on the bunk, and it lay there inert, the queer eyes closed for ever. There was no movement of the tiny chest, no pulse in the arteries. Delie flung herself on her knees by the bunk and burst into sobs of relief.

When she had recovered her composure she insisted that he should go in to Waikerie and get the doctor. He wanted to take the baby with him, but she was obstinate. She wanted to face the doctor here.

When he was gone, and the sound of the rowlocks had ceased, she washed herself and did her hair very carefully, and put on her good dress of lilac poplin. Her mind was clear and calm now. She must not appear nervous, she must not act an appearance of grief, for the doctor knew that she must be relieved, not sorry at what had happened.

Then she sat down on the bunk, took the infant on her lap, and stared at it musingly. It was the first time she had looked on death without emotion. Her mind felt cold and emptied of all but simple wonder, as she stared at the little finger-nails—still

growing?—and the wispy hair. What had changed, except that the heart no longer beat, the lungs no longer moved?

If somehow breath could be restored, as happened sometimes when a man appeared to be drowned, life would go on as before; and what then became of the theory that a man's soul fled at the moment of death? Soul, personality, mind, seemed to be but a manifestation of energy, much as heat was. And a child so young, without the physical equipment for a proper brain; could it be said to have a 'soul' at all?

Yes, it was death that made life so mysterious. The individual, so fragile, so complicated and delicate in his organism, could so easily die; yet the life-force was indestructible: call it energy, will, motion, rhythm, God, or what you liked.

She stared at the light-ripples in their rhythmic dance over cabin wall and ceiling; it was there, and in the faint, pulsing light of the most distant star, and in the tiniest transparent creature crawling in the river mud, and had been in this scrap of humanity, bud of her own living flesh, and now was gone from it. She saw now that it was wrong to say "He is gone", "He has passed away". Rather one should say "It has gone; it has left him; he is bereft of life".

She was still sitting there in a kind of trance, the dead child in her lap, when Brenton returned after two hours, with the doctor. She heard their feet on the paddle-box steps, but she was so stiff and numb that she could not move. For a fleeting moment she thought, 'It has left me, too; I am dead.' Then a painful aching began in her legs and arms as the blood began to flow again, and she thought, 'It must be agony to be recalled to life.'

Brenton bent his head under the low door, leading the way. The little doctor followed, a bag in his hand which he set down on a chest. Before glancing at the baby he took Delie's cold hand in his, and looked searchingly into her face.

"You'd better get Mrs. Edwards a hot drink," he said, his cheerful voice subdued. "Her hands are like ice."

"Yes, right away," said Brenton, seeming glad of the excuse to go out again.

"And you lie down there and pull a couple of blankets over

you," said the doctor sternly to Delie. He took up the dead child and laid it on a cloth on top of the chest of drawers.

"I'm . . . all right."

"You're chilled, and, naturally, feeling a certain amount of shock." He began loosening the baby's clothes and making his examination. "H'm, yes . . . asphyxia, obviously. Your husband found her lying on her face, I believe?"

"Yes."

"How long would that be after you left the boat?"

"I don't know . . . Some time."

"And she appeared to be all right when you left?"

Silence.

"She was breathing normally when you left?"

"Yes."

"Why *will* mothers use these soft pillows? Dangerous things."

The pupils of her eyes were so wide that the eyes appeared black in her pale face. She clutched the top of the blankets and stared at him over the edge. He turned his back on her and covered the baby with a cloth.

"I don't know if I told you, Mrs. Edwards; but it may help you to know that few, very few Mongoloid children survive the first five years of life, and only half of those who do ever reach adulthood. Your daughter had a very small life-expectancy anyway."

"Oh." It was the faintest breath of sound.

"They are particularly susceptible to pulmonary infection and tuberculosis, so that with your medical history . . ."

He walked over to the cabin window and looked out at the sparse trees and tangled lignum bushes of the island. "You often go for walks on the island, Mrs. Edwards? It doesn't look particularly inviting."

"Oh . . . I prefer rowing, but you see Brenton had the dinghy, and I thought——" Her voice trailed away. He had turned and looked at her, his bright little eyes shrewd and comprehending. In that instant she knew that he knew. The words died in her throat. There was an interminable moment of silence, in which

TIME, FLOW SOFTLY

she saw herself arrested, charged with murder, convicted, sentenced to death or life imprisonment.

"... Well, I must sign the death certificate. Cause of death: asphyxia. There will be no need for you to attend the inquest. I will give evidence of death by misadventure while the child was unattended."

"Thank you, doctor." And her large eyes said a great deal more.

Brenton came in with a cup of hot cocoa, and asked the doctor to step into the saloon for a whisky. He had brought a bottle of hot water wrapped in a towel to put at her cold feet. Delie turned her eyes away from the tiny shape under the cloth and drank the hot milk. She felt suddenly, overwhelmingly sleepy.

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

The children asked very few questions. They had not seen the baby, so for them it had scarcely existed. They came back to the boat looking healthy and happy, and Delie could not have enough of them, of their eager voices and bright, intelligent eyes. Her breasts ached with the unwanted milk, but already Time had washed a silt of days over the dreadful fact that lay like a rock at the bottom of her mind.

Had the doctor said anything, hinted anything to Brenton over their whiskies, or on the way back in the dinghy? It seemed to her that he looked at her strangely. He was getting more morose as the river failed to move, and the whisky became a daily habit.

One morning, hearing the crack of the rifle, she came out to see him aiming at a formation of pelicans, flying downstream towards the nesting grounds of the Coorong, far to the south. He fired again, but the undulating flight of the birds did not change. He swore, taking new aim.

"Brenton!" She put her hand on his arm. "You wouldn't shoot pelicans!"

His eyes had a dazed and clouded look, but he dropped the

rifle and went inside. She heard the cork being drawn from a new bottle of whisky.

"I wish you wouldn't drink so much, Brenton," she said to him one night, trying to keep her voice level and impersonal, to avoid nagging. "It's bad for you, and—"

"What else is a man to do, stuck in a puddle with nothing coming in but doctors' bills and hospital accounts . . . and a wife that's no use to him." He moved the whisky-bottle irritably on the saloon table.

"If only you wouldn't sit here, drinking all alone——"

"Who else is there to drink with? You?" He laughed nastily.

"You could go over and see Jim Melville."

"And climb up that cliff in the dark? What if I fell down and broke me neck? Where'd you be then, eh? Though I don't believe you'd care, apart from the money angle."

"Brenton! How can you say——"

"'Brenton! How can you!'" he mimicked. "I don't mean you're interested in money, you haven't enough sense. I mean you'd like to be free, rid of the lot of us, and be able to spend all your time dabbing paint on canvas. You hate responsibility, don't you? Only you can't get out of it, and without me you'd be worse off than ever."

She was struck silent. There was a grain of truth in his words, enough to startle her into a doubt of her own motives. Had she not, subconsciously, desired the baby's death before it was ever born? Had she welcomed its imbecility as a justification? She felt as if a black pit had suddenly opened just in front of her feet. Turning and pushing open the wire-screen door of the cabin, against which moths and midges flung themselves in a mad dance, she stumbled out on deck.

There were the stars, unchanged, unchanging; Orion moving towards the west, the Cross swinging low over the island. On the river they lay reflected, in the same patterns yet softer, slightly blurred. If she looked down long enough the river became a black sky, the sky a great river which flowed for ever westward. Above was below, below above, and all became unreal.

But her mind shook off the solace of the stars.

"You want to be rid of the lot of us," Did he suspect what had happened, that she had deliberately walked off and left the baby to die? The feeling of certainty in the rightness of what she had done deserted her. She walked up and down in a torment of self-loathing.

But gradually her old ideas asserted themselves. The doctor had known, she was sure, and had tacitly approved. 'The child would never have been an adult mentally, and had little life-expectancy. She clung to the idea that in the infant was only the germ of a soul, which grew and developed with the body and mind. What had been destroyed was only one step farther from the embryo and the seed; only a potential. And she had done nothing except by default, whatever her intentions had been. . . .

And hadn't she felt the same bitter despair before the last two were born? Yet natural love had not failed her there. And she had jumped in to save Alex from the river without any hesitation. No! It was a cruel lie of Brenton's. Her courage flowed back to sustain her.

Mrs. Melville came to see her, bringing fruit and flowers as to an invalid, and an overwhelming sympathy which she found hard to bear. Yet such kindness brought tears of weakness to her eyes.

There was still no break in the drought by August. One day Mr. Melville came to the cliff-top, shouting and waving his arms, with some news so important that he couldn't wait to slide down the pipe and come over in the dinghy. He cupped his hands and shouted. Delie and Brenton, staring across the water, heard faintly the one word, "War."

They looked at each other soberly, impressed by the historic moment. There had been rumours of war, and now it had come. It would not affect Australia much, of course, and certainly not this stagnant reach of an inland river; but there was something solemn and dramatic about the thought of men, even on the other side of the world, marching out to kill each other, to conquer and destroy.

Delie remembered the Boer War, and how she had been afraid Brenton might go. Thank heaven her sons were too young for

this one. It would be over in a few months, Brenton said.

He celebrated the news by opening another case of whisky. As the number of full bottles steadily decreased, he began to stay up later and later at night, singing loudly to himself, beating time with a bottle on the table and keeping Delie awake.

His temper had become so uncertain that she was afraid to remonstrate with him. She kept out of his way as much as possible in such a confined space. He slept late in the mornings, and got up with a sour breath and bloodshot eyes. He still walked with a stiff leg, and she noticed lately that his voice had become blurred again, almost as it had been just after his accident.

One night when he was particularly noisy she crept to the saloon door to shut it so that he might not wake the children. Alex and Meg now slept in what had been the engineer's and mate's cabin, and the two older boys in the small cabin that had been newly built aft.

As Delie silently stretched her arm in for the handle of the door, Brenton raised his bloodshot eyes.

"Leave it alone!" he said roughly. "I want some air."

"But——"

"And gerrou, djer hear me? Lookin' a' me all the time with those great eyes . . ." His grey curls were on end, the vein stood out in his neck like a blue cord.

She shrank back on to the deck, and was startled by bumping into a small figure.

"Gordon! What are you doing here?" she whispered.

He grasped her hand and pulled her urgently along the deck. "Why's he making such a noise? Is he mad?"

"Shh! No, it's just that—it's not his fault, but the drought's got him down, and he's drinking too much. He——"

She stopped short, listening rigidly to the slurred voice from the saloon:

"Murderess! Bloody murderess! You're no berrer than I am, d'you hear? Least I wouldn' leave me own flesh an' blood t'die. I oughter finish you off before y' kill any more with yer damn carelessness . . ."

Petrified, clutching each other's hands, the mother and son

stood on the dim deck. They heard a chair scrape back, fall to the floor, a sound of breaking glass . . . then the click of a rifle-breech being opened and shut.

"Quick!" Delie breathed almost soundlessly into Gordon's ear. "Run aft and get Brenny out of bed, and untie the dinghy. Get in and hold it ready till I come. Quiet, now!"

As she slipped into the cabin where the two youngest lay, and lifted a sleeping child on to each shoulder, her mind was calm and clear. Something had been happening to Brenton for weeks past; it seemed as if the old injury was having some long-delayed effect on his brain, and even now, perhaps, he was insane.

She was half-way down the steps to the lower deck when Alex began to murmur sleepily against her ear.

"Hush! Hush, darling," she whispered in terror.

But, half-awake, he began to twist in her arms. "No! No! I don't wanner!" he shouted. There was a dragging step on the deck above, and Brenton's voice:

"Whatsh goin' on there?"

She did not answer, but, reaching the bottom deck, fled aft. She handed the children down to Gordon, and as she was climbing after them she saw Brenton at the rail of the top deck, a lamp in one hand, his rifle in the other.

"Come back here!" he roared.

With trembling hands she grasped the oars and swung the dinghy round under the shelter of the paddle-box, where he could not see them. Then she rowed as hard as she could for the landing across the river.

"Come back, y' bitch!" He was on the lower deck now. There was a sharp crack, and a bullet skipped on the water close by. Thank goodness it was so dark! But her fear was not of the wildly-aimed gun, but that he might jump in and swim after them, perhaps overturn the dinghy. But he remained, cursing, on the deck. A second shot, a third echoed back from the cliffs. Then there was a muffled thump, and silence.

She could not remember afterwards how she got the whimpering, frightened children up the cliff track in the darkness. Without

TOWARDS THE FINAL SHORE

Gordon she would never have managed it. Perhaps the darkness helped, for they could not see the steepness of the steps and how one slip could plunge them all into the river. The Melvilles' farm was in darkness, but soon there were friendly lights and voices.

"I'm afraid, I'm afraid!" she moaned. "There was a dreadful thump, and then nothing. I think he may have shot himself."

Mrs. Melville gave the shivering, frightened boys some warm milk and popped them into the beds they had occupied a short time before, while Delie put down the two youngest. She insisted that Mr. Melville, who wanted to go to the boat alone, should not do so without the local policeman and the doctor.

"If he's alive he may be dangerous," she said. "He has the gun, and he seemed quite mad. But please go as soon as you can. He may be wounded."

A faint, cold dawn was breaking and the roosters were crowing in the Melvilles' yard when the farmer returned, looking tired and drawn.

"He's not dead," he said, laying a kindly, heavy hand on Delie's shoulder and pressing her down into a chair near the glowing wood stove. "But . . . you must be brave. The doctor says he's had a stroke, and will be paralysed for the rest of his life. He will live unless he has another stroke; that would probably be fatal. I've taken him in to the Waikerie hospital."

CHAPTER FORTY

In 1915 the river began to flow again. Delie heard the curlews crying in the swamps and knew that the drought was ending; but by now she knew also that Brenton, who had been so strong, so active, so virile, would never move again, but was reduced to an inert lump of flesh.

Ironically, now that he was no longer capable of navigating a boat, the river reforms he had advocated for so long began to be carried out. The last drought (which had meant among other

things that the Renmark fruit-growers had to transport their goods by horse and cart to the railhead at a cost of eighteen and six a ton extra) had brought the bickering States to final agreement over the locking question.

South Australia was to build nine locks between Blanchetown and Wentworth; the river would be converted into a series of great steps, each forty miles long, ensuring a depth of six feet all the year round. On 5th June 1915, Sir Henry Galway, Governor of South Australia, laid the foundation stone of the first lock at Blanchetown.

Delie read the report of the ceremony, of the cheering crowds and the Parliamentary party in the *Marion*, to the silent Brenton. He could hear what was said to him, though he did not always appear to take in the meaning of the words. He answered questions by closing his eyes, once for yes, twice for no.

He had not lost any weight, and the sight of such a big, strong-looking man lying there helpless was worse than if he had looked thin and weak.

When he first came back from the hospital, he was able to articulate a little. But all he said, over and over again, was, "I want . . . I want . . ."

Though she strained her ears in agony, bending close to his lips, and though the sweat broke out on his brow with the terrible effort he made to express his wish, he never got past those two words. She wondered if he wanted to say that he preferred to die and be done with it, or if there was some person he particularly wanted to see. But when she suggested this, and mentioned different names, he only blinked his eyes wearily in a negative.

After that he did not speak again. His mouth never moved, except to take the spout of the feeding cup. His lips were not twisted by the stroke, but had taken the line she remembered in Aunt Hester's mouth towards the end—a downward curve of bitter resignation, yielding nothing, unchanging and severe.

Mrs. Melville had adopted Delie and her family. Brenton had a front room with a big bed; Delie slept on a stretcher beside him. He could call her attention by making a noise in his throat.

Well, there would be no more babies, anyway, thought Delie. Instead she had a man to nurse who was helpless as a baby, and who would never grow out of it . . . a life sentence. She couldn't help feeling that she was being punished.

To repay Mrs. Melville, who would not take a penny in board, Delie began to make small arty objects for her hostess. She painted a glass lampshade with a river scene, made book-covers and penholders of coloured suede, and even used her precious oil-paints for pen-painting on doilies of black silk—an art which Mrs. Melville appreciated more than the finest landscape.

This gave her an idea for making money. The next time she was in Waikerie she went into the leading draper's shop and showed some of her work. The result was a commission to paint knick-knacks with local scenes for the tourists who visited the river in the summer months.

Mrs. Melville asked her what she was going to do with the steamer; wouldn't it be better to sell it, and perhaps invest the money in a small shop where she could sell the things she made? But Delie shook her head obstinately. The steamer was half Brenton's, and it was his life; without it he would not wish to live. Somehow she would get the *Philadelphia* working again.

Before the first big fresh came down the river she had sat for the Harbours Board examination and received her Master's certificate—the first woman ever to qualify as a steamboat captain on the Murray. She had completed her two years' experience as acting-mate on the *Philadelphia*, and she passed her theoretical exam with flying colours.

Luckily she had a visual memory, and she could close her eyes and see the long Moorna reach and the burnt stump you kept in line when the channel crossed over, or the treacherous point that stuck out opposite the end of Pollard's Cutting. . . .

She had the certificate framed and took it proudly to show Brenton.

"Aren't you pleased? Doesn't it show you must have taught me well?"

A brief closing of the eyelids.

"Darling, the river's coming down; soon the *Philadelphia* will have enough water under her to float her again. Would you like to go back on the river?"

His lids closed long and emphatically. When they opened again his eyes, now more grey than blue yet still alive and alert in his helpless body, sought hers anxiously.

"Don't worry. I've sent a telegram for Charlie, and I know he'll come for your sake. The boys can stay here and go to school—it's not very far across the paddocks, and they can have a pony to ride. I've promised Mrs. Melville to let her have Meg too, for a while, but not Alex until his chest gets stronger. I'll insist on paying board for them.

"In a few years they'll make good deck-hands, but they must go to school, and meanwhile I've got a boy from the draper's in Waikerie who's mad about steamers and would pay us to let him come as crew. You'll still be the skipper——"

He closed his eyes twice.

"Well, I'll be the skipper, and you'll be the mate. We'll build a big window in your cabin so that you can see all that goes on. Won't that be fine?"

He closed his eyes, rather wearily, and she pressed his big, nerveless hand. Tears of sympathy started to her eyes, and she put her head down beside his. All past bitterness and warring had been wiped out by his terrible misfortune. She could feel nothing but tenderness and love for the magnificent wreck he had become, like a once-proud steamer hopelessly aground.

He, too, seemed to have forgotten his mad rage against her. His eyes would light with something like pleasure when he saw her enter the room. But the expression of his mouth never changed, though its muscles were not completely paralysed; he could still eat.

Everything else had to be done for him; he was as helpless as a new-born infant. Yet Delie hoped to act as his nurse, look after a young child, and run a paddle-steamer with the aid of a mad engineer and a boy who had never been inside a wheel-house. She would have to get a cook, she realised; he and Alex would be able to keep an eye on Brenton when she was busy at the wheel. For

the rest, they would just have to tie up when she was not steering, at least until she had taught the boy to know a snag from a reef.

And her painting? There would be no time for that any more. Her youthful ambition had faded with the years; she no longer cared to set the Yarra on fire, so long as she could be left quiet to paint the truth that was in her. But there was no time now. Firmly she packed her painting-things away in a locker, snapped a padlock on the latch and threw the key into the river.

Charlie McBean arrived to see Brenton. His wild eyebrows were more white than grey now, but his eyes still had a blue gleam of independence.

Though she had warned him what to expect, he became speechless with shock when he saw what time had done to his old skipper. He could only sit and press the lifeless hand, blinking his fierce old eyes rapidly, and breathing a waft of onion-laden breath across the bed.

The engine and the boiler he greeted like old friends, and went over them lovingly with a piece of cotton rag, crooning to himself. "I know the old girl's ways, and she knows mine, Missus," he said. "She'll always do 'er best for me."

"Teddy's still the skipper, you understand," said Delie, who wondered how Charlie would react to working for a woman. "I've got my ticket, in case of any queries from the Board; but he'll be able to see everything that goes on from his cabin, and direct things from there."

This was a myth, and they both knew it, but Charlie nodded vigorously and polished his nose with the back of his hand.

"Teddy Edwards would rot on dry land, just like I would," he said. "Even the way 'e is, 'e's a better skipper than most. Poor old Teddy—never would of believed it, if I 'adn't seen 'im with me own eyes." He sighed windily, and Delie retreated a little from the blast of onion-laden air. Charlie had evidently been applying the onion therapy after a bender. "You're game, Missus; I'll give you that in."

Delie blushed like a girl, and smiled. She knew what high praise this was from the misogynist Charlie.

"There's just one thing, Charlie. No spragging the gauge. She's not as young as she was, and if anything happened I'd feel it was my fault. The skipper wouldn't stand a chance if she blew up."

"*Me* sprag the gauge!" said Charlie as if offended at the very idea. "What do you take me for?"

He needed this job, for he was too unreliable with his drinking-bouts for a mail-steamer or a passenger-boat that had to keep to a time-table; and the private trading steamers which might have employed him were getting less. The drought had been another blow to the river trade; the railways were taking more and more away from the boats.

Delie had arranged for the sale of the rest of the whisky to a hotel in Waikerie. She wanted to get rid of this cargo before Charlie disposed of it for her. She was wondering how they were ever to establish themselves as a trading vessel again without any capital for buying new stock, when an unexpected windfall solved her problems.

It was as if dear old Uncle Charles had known of her need and sent the money. A letter arrived, which had been long delayed in its journey to various towns along the river, telling of his death and her inheritance of the farm property.

In the first moment she was tempted to give up her difficult plan of running the steamer alone, and go back to the farm with her family, where at least they could live off the land and would not starve. But this would be a retrograde step and she knew it. Her courage rose again to meet the challenge of the future.

Probate would have been granted by now; she wired the Executor company in Echuca to sell, to realise what they could and send her the capital. She could depend on them to get as good a price as possible, as their commission depended upon it. Then she set about ordering stores; no whisky, but a great many small useful items which would sell readily among housewives far from the nearest shop.

The last connection with her own family in Australia was now gone, and Brenton's only relatives lived in Sydney. Yet she had new ties in her children, natives of this country as she was not,

third generation Australians through their father. To them England would be but a misty country beyond the seas, learned about in geography lessons but remote from their experience. Perhaps they would return one day, but she would not. She still feared the sea.

Mr. McVilleville, that handy man, had put a new, large window in the cabin over the bed that had been installed for Brenton, and as soon as they were ready to leave he was carried aboard.

As he lay looking up at the dancing-light-ripples on the cabin ceiling, his face seemed to relax; the bitter, closed lines of his mouth looked more content, or at least resigned. Remembering how he used to show her the wild-flowers in the bush when they were first married, she picked some Murray daisies to put in his cabin, the small everlastings like stiff, golden suns surrounded by white flames.

Thinking to cheer him, she put one of the papery flowers in his hand that lay lifelessly on the coverlet. There was a noise in his throat, and to her horror she saw two tears form in the eyes that looked at the flower. They ran down towards the pillow. He closed his eyes but the tears continued to force their way out. She had never seen him cry before.

She flung herself beside him, feeling shamed and desolated. All the consoling words that rose in her throat died there before they could be uttered. What could one say to a man in his plight? The flower had already said for her, "Spring is here; life goes on just the same without you."

He could not even raise a hand to brush away the tears. She took a handkerchief and mopped them for him, and then used it on her own eyes.

"Charlie has steam up," she said at last. "We're ready to cast off. You'll feel better once we're moving, you always said a boat was a live thing, and you'll feel how glad she is to be off again. You watch out the window and see if I handle her right. Brenton, can you hear me?" For his stillness frightened her.

His eyes opened and blinked once. She dropped a kiss upon his stony face and went out, feeling an angry rebellion against

life which could do this to a man. Usually she loved life, but there had been times, the time of the wreck, of Adam's death, and the loss of her first baby, when its senseless cruelty revolted her . . . And Brenton had been such an active, vital person.

As soon as she was in the wheel-house, her spirits rose again. This was more than just a setting out; it meant leaving behind a hateful place and moving into a future that could not be worse. It was only parting with the three children that gave her a pang. But she would be calling at the farmhouse regularly, and she knew that Mrs. Melville would look after them better than she could herself. Little Meg had taken to her at once.

It was a proud and thrilling moment when, with the ropes inexpertly cast off by the new deck-hand, she brought the *Philadelphia* round and headed her downstream.

The shrill, indomitable note of her whistle echoed from the cliffs as if she had not lain there useless for more than a year. The red-gum paddles bit into the water; smoke panted from the funnel and streamed out across the river.

Charlie came up from below and stood at the bottom step of the wheel-house.

"You're doin' all right, Missus," he said. "I never bin engineer with a woman givin' orders before, but I'll get used to it. Just go easy on that there whistle for a bit, willyer? The new and is a ruddy useless bandicoot as a fireman, and I'll 'ave ter 'elp 'im till 'e gets the knack of it."

"Right-oh, Charlie. That was just for the skipper's benefit."

But it was for herself, too; a challenge to the future, a defiant cry against fate. She closed her eyes and heard the faint echoes of that peal, so wild and free, echoing back and back from bends far out of sight.

